

# Discussing Containment

## Chinese perceptions on how the United States seeks to contain an insecure China

[ Steven Henin ]

**Abstract**—The US does not currently hold an official policy of containment towards China. In fact, Several US Presidents and high ranking officials have stated that the US welcomes a rising China. Yet, many scholars and analysts contend that there is a rising threat perception among China that the US is trying to contain China. This article randomly sampled and systematically analyzes the current Chinese literature from elites and scholars to determine what factors lead to this perceived strategy. Contrary to current theories, a perceived US containment policy by China is mostly defensive as it is geared towards a domestic audience and focuses on China's national core interests. In response, Chinese scholars call on China to continue its peaceful development.

**Keywords**—Containment, Perception, Engagement, China, United States

### I. INTRODUCTION

Recently, many China watchers, policymakers, and scholars within the US contend that China perceives the US is trying to contain her. While this general assumption is a sweeping accusation, little attention has been put forward to research the factors implicating the US is being perceived as trying to contain China. In addition, each issue that is perceived as containment is assumed to have equal weight within the Chinese belief.

Chinese scholars who conclude the US does seek to enact a containment strategy do not perceive a full containment like the Soviet Union. Rather, they tend to link containment with domains that are recognized as core interests of China and its growth.

For those Chinese scholars and elite who perceive such a threat, some see containment efforts to preserve US hegemony, some view containment out of fear of China rising as a potential adversary, and others see containment as a continuation from Cold War policy. Within China, those who perceive containment by the US is only a single subset of the larger picture of Chinese perceptions of US policy towards China.

This article does not question whether containment perceptions reflect the dominant perception of Chinese beliefs on whether the US is or is not seeking to contain China, nor does it in any form conclude that China as a whole views US policy on China is one of containment. Rather, this article

focuses on assessing and analyzing what factors and motives lead to those who perceive a US strategy of containment.

### II. LITERATURE

While much of the literature has been focused on US policy, several scholarly works discuss Chinese perceptions of the US. After the conclusion of the Cold War in 1991, China's external threat from the USSR diminished, at the same time Chinese strategists ascertained Japan was not a threat within the remaining century. Instead, Chinese analysts in 1993 concluded that the US was seeking to use political, economic, and military means to contain China and threaten it's internal affairs (Whiting 1996: 607). After the Cold War, Chinese elites while seeing their country rapidly develop, maintained the posture that the US would keep its superiority for the foreseeable future (Zhang 2005). As China began its rise as a great power, it was believed the US would follow realist theory of a zero-sum game. To many in China, the US was seeking to maintain it's own hegemony and interests, and with strategic mistrust and the “Chinese threat” seen as influencing policy, the US would try to limit China's rising global power.<sup>1</sup> In terms of China's public perception, Chen's research concludes that due to a combination of the governments and medias promotion of external threats by the US as well as open criticism of China, a overwhelming majority of citizens agreed that they perceived the US to having hostile intentions against China (Chen 2001:258). Due to the fact that several Chinese elite are not yet confident in their current state of capabilities, the US will try to contain China's developing power (Kennedy, 2007: 274). Yubin on the other hand contends that China's perception of containment is out of the assumption that US military presence around Asia will not necessarily lead to stability (Yubin 1999: 27). As US-Sino relations enters a new phase, China has called for establishing a “new type of relationship” that relieves its anxieties of US containment (Ratner 2013: 29). Therefore, to reduce miscalculated conflict, both countries need to reduce its threat perceptions (Whiting 1996).

While the threat perception on behavior can illicit different decisions by Beijing, two contentions are postulated. First, although there is a rise in Chinese perception of US containment, Beijing will continue to favor peaceful relations with the US. Second, counter to previous prognoses that containment fears are implicit in all US policy, Chinese elite and scholars will primarily perceive containment in areas deemed core interests to China.

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1 For example see Lieberthal and Wang (2012); Shambaugh (1996: 205).

### III. METHODOLOGY

As with any government, it is difficult to obtain internal dialogues about a country's strategy. This could not be anymore true with China, who often labels such documents as state secrets. Instead, when analyzing current perceptions and possible paths of development for China's future, many scholars look at articles in Chinese affiliated top foreign policy research institutes journals.<sup>2</sup> Many who publish in these journals help shape and construct policy and perceptions for the central decision makers. If an article does not reflect the top political leaders ideology, there is a higher chance that the article will not appear in the journal. In addition to these journals, other articles in peer-reviewed but not government affiliated journals help understand what the perception among general scholars who represent a more public perception.

This article is based on research from 100 Chinese-language journal articles, with 50 published in government affiliated institutions, while the other 50 articles in various Chinese journals published around China. To understand why Chinese perceive this threat, the data is collected by specifically searching for articles that contain "Meiguo" Ezhi" "Zhongguo" (US containing China),<sup>3</sup> with random samples collected from the search results. The prestigious Chinese policy journals were sampled from Meiguo Yanjiu (American Studies), Guoji Wenti Yanjiu (International Political Studies), Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi (World Economy and Politics), and Xiandai Guoji Guanxi (Contemporary International Relations). The other 50 articles were collected from the same search method, however, collected from CNKI.<sup>4</sup>

It goes without stating that the articles collected do not represent Chinese overall perception. Scholars who do mention containment, often advocate that the US uses it as part of their strategy. At the same time, these articles are geared towards a domestic audience, as these articles were written in the Chinese-language.

#### A. Perceptions of US Containment

Within the sample there is a mixture of opinion on what the US foreign policy towards China is. While no scholars within the sample believe the US is using a containment policy similar to the policy towards the USSR during the Cold War,

- 2 For example of literature that use this sampling method, see Kennedy (2007), David Shambaugh, *Beautiful Imperialist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), Whiting (1996).
- 3 This does not imply "containment" represents the dominant Chinese perception.
- 4 The website used to collect the samples is <http://epub.cnki.net/KNS/brief/result.aspx?dbprefix=CJFQ>. A total of 341 articles were displayed. Articles were then randomly proportionally selected by the amount of articles discussing containment by year. For example, 2012 displayed 48 articles, and therefore 14 were selected.

most scholars contend that the US utilizes a dual policy that maintains some elements of containment. The difference is whether scholars see the main face of the policy as engagement or containment. Others believe that although some groups within the US want to contain China, the US policy is not one of containment.

While the US is perceived as engaging with China by deepening economic relations, it is also seen as containing China's rise for its own interests.[14] Many scholars perceive that the US's main policy towards China is engagement, as opposed to a main policy of containment. By continuing economic engagement, as well as cooperation through dialogues, the US is trying to avoid a Cold War.[16:39] Containment is only emphasized for it's own security measures, as opposed to a true policy of containment towards China.[25:16] At the same time, they perceive the US use the possibility of containment as a way to prepare in case of a potential threat.[19:32]

During the 2008 global crisis, the US was seen as containing China to preserve its own hegemony to avoid a conflict with China, simultaneously, the US emphasized deepened mutual reliance by becoming more interdependent with cooperation.[8:36] Yet, after the rebalance towards Asia, some say the trend is turning into containment with some cooperation.[1:36]

A minority of scholars within the sample believe that the US does not currently hold a containment policy. While China was still weak, the US used a dual engagement policy, yet after 2005 when China's economy grew, the relation turned into competition mixed with engagement. Although US and China are not friends, they are not enemies, allowing China to grow.[5] In addition, while tensions in the Taiwan Strait increased at several points, both countries hope to maintain peace and avoid conflict.[7]

#### B. Examples of Chinese Containment Perceptions

The following are the main political, economic, and military issues that Chinese perception of a containment against China threat is based off. Some issues like Taiwan cover both political and military threats, while others are issues among themselves. The top three perceptions are elaborated below.

Political Containment: Chinese Threat, Ideological Differences Human Rights, Strengthening Alliances, Taiwan.

Economic Containment: Currency Reevaluation, Economic Sanctions, TPP, Trade Protectionism, Technology embargo.

Military Containment: East and South China Sea, Military Exercises, Rebalance to Asia, Military Alliances, Taiwan.

##### 1) Taiwan

Taiwan is perceived as one of the main ways the US is seeking to contain China. Observers see the US commitment to

Taiwan as the most consistent form of containing China and hindering China from unification with Taiwan. While a relative minority of Chinese authors continue to see Taiwan as a containment tool in terms of ideological notions that the US is seeking to suppress communism, those who do, advocate the US is using Taiwan's democracy as a way to contain China's influence around the world.[18:19]

Many scholars in the sample viewed China's rise as correlating with the US decline as the world is becoming multi-polar. In an effort to sustain its power, realist observers sees the US policy of "not united, not independent, no war" as preserving the status quo and protecting geostrategic interests.[18] While the US continuously states they will not allow a Taiwan independence movement, most scholars observe the US emphasis the no uniting stance.

During the US war in the Middle East, focus on Taiwan being used to contain China was mostly seen in weapon sales. After the US began to wind down troops in the Middle East, authors saw the US as realizing that China's military had been rapidly increasing, and thus seen as a threat. By 2011, with the US pivot to Asia, observers saw burgeoning efforts for the US to maintain a military presence around Taiwan. [22]

During 2000-2013 China's economy was seen as becoming more influential in the world. By 2008, Chinese observers saw warming of ties between Taiwan and China as a perception that peaceful unification is still achievable. At the same time, while many observers see US policy towards Taiwan as interference with internal policy, they predict the US would foster a conagement policy where it will continue to engage with China but simultaneously sell weapons to Taiwan.[9]

With China's naval and military modernization, yet the US military still far more superior, few authors in the sample predicted there would be conflict between China and the US. Instead, most authors in the sample were more pragmatic in their assessment of the US policy towards Taiwan. While perceived as one of the most fundamental threats facing China, many view the US as continuing to interfere with Taiwan and China's unification.

## 2) Strategic Rebalance to Asia

With the US war in the Middle East dwindling down, many observed that the US saw the rise of China as a possible threat to its hegemony in the region.[2] [21] [22]

With the pivot reintroducing an increased presence of military personnel in South Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Australia, most observers saw the US as a military pivot, as opposed to economic engagement within the area as stated by the US. Although differing in the extent and the exact countries involved, many scholars perceived that the US was soliciting Japan, South Korea, Australia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Singapore, the Philippines, India, and Mongolia to encircle China with a NATO like alliance.

More pragmatic scholars observed that the US has been and will continue to engage with China.[13:36] However, they also claim that the pivot focuses more heavily on containment through an increased military presence.[22] One scholar stated

that the pivot "on the one hand, the US is increasing engagement with China, strengthening cooperation and increasing bilateral relations. However, on the other hand, the US is continuously strengthening its alliance network, especially with countries around China that are afraid of China's rise." He continued to say that "at the same time, they are increasing their military presence around China with an abundantly clear strategy looking to surround China. The US only has one goal, to use its political, military, and security postures to contain and prevent China's rise, constricting its influence in Asia." [8:144]

With many scholars more optimistic about China's rising power, many do not perceive the US containment as achieving its intended goals. For some observers, China's burgeoning economic engagement with its neighbors would discourage them from partaking in any containment efforts, instead they will continue to favor a peaceful rise from China.[5] [10] Others noted that due to domestic and international constraints, the US will ultimately constrain its Asian-Pacific strategy and seek out mutually beneficial policy like increased trade with China.[5]

## 3) Economic Containment

With an economic transition compared with 35 years ago, Chinese perception reflects a growing confidence in the realm of economics. By the end of the Cold War, China's economy was already a sense of pride among Chinese. Due to this confident view, perceived economic threats are significantly lower.

As opposed to military affairs, China is more optimistic in economic affairs. In the sample, although perceived economic containment efforts do exist, they are significantly less than military affairs, allowing scholars to be more optimistic. However, the majority of observers see China's strong economy as being perceived as a threat to the US.[12] As the Cold War ended, many observers felt that as China's economy began to strengthen, the US would abandoned its military efforts to protect its hegemony, and replace it with a grand strategy of economic competition.[23]

Since the financial crisis of 2008, Chinese scholars saw China's dexterous economy as a sign of hope, yet they perceived the US as engaging in conagement to limit China's economic growth, while also looking for more areas of cooperation.[8:148] For example, observers see trade protectionism like the 2009 "buy American goods" campaign, 2009 steel and tire import tariffs as well as frequent calls for RMB reevaluation as ways to contain China's economy while still being able to engage in bilateral trade.[11:148] [13:35] [15] [20]

With several scholars believing the US's power is in a decline, the US has increased economic containment through the rebalance and the TPP. [6:47] If being able to contain China's economic output, the US would be able to maintain and preserve their economic hegemony as well as maintaining the dollar as the worlds primary currency. [2:47]

With China's economy surpassing Japans in 2010, China's scholars have become more confident in China's economy, leading to a lower threat perception.<sup>5</sup> In addition, with many neighbors economies heavily depending on China, scholars perceive its neighbors will continue to strengthen economic ties for mutual gain, as opposed to joining a US strategy of containment.[19] To break through a perceived economic containment, China and the US should continue in economic relations as a new type of power relationship to increase cooperation and mutual interests.[1] [5] [7] [25]

## IV. CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY RESPONSE

When discussing what China's policy towards the US should be, the overwhelming majority of scholars concluded that China should continue to engage with the US. Although perceiving the US seeks to contain China, maintaining cooperation and mutual interests through political, economic, and scientific spheres, China should use peaceful resolutions to solve differences.[1:39]

In response to a perceived containment strategy, China should continue its “harmonious relations” policy, further integrating into the international system.[10] China should emphasize mutual respect, increase communications, and seek win win.[1:36] Maintaining economic relations with the US doesn't just affect US-Sino relations, it also allows for a more stable world economy.[14:207]

Even with competition, through cooperation, both countries can win.[1:36] China should continue towards a path of peaceful development, not seeing to contest the US supremacy.[7:43] As China continues to rise, it should avoid hegemonism and conflict,[21] as it is China's destiny to peacefully rise and become a great power.[23:35]

While maintaining relations with the US, China must also focus on protecting it's sovereignty, continue development, and maintain security. China and the US have an important role in each others foreign policy, yet because the South China Sea is integral to China's sovereignty, China must keep all options open.[3:19]

To reduce tensions between the two nations, China should also continue military exchanges,[17] science and tech cooperation, and increase dialogues on safety.[4:38] While contending that the US and China have different political and ideological concepts on international affairs, although conflict and tensions will occur, as long as both countries seek mutual interests, understanding of each others core interests, and increase cooperation, the two countries can develop mutual beneficial policies.[25:16] However, at the same time, China should take preventive measures in case tensions do rise. To do so, China should avoid a military competition, but seek to increase vigilance. As one author put it, “only a strong military will elicit the US respect for China's core interests.”[17]

## V. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Several similarities can be seen throughout the different perceptions of a perceived containment policy of China. The first is that most scholars who discuss containment, do not see the US strategy as solely focusing on containment. Rather, the US policy has a dual policy of both engagement and containment, fluctuating depending on current world affairs. That is, a majority of scholars viewed US military actions as containment efforts, while using economic means to engage. While Chinese elite are more pragmatic in their assessments, labeling only core issues as perceived containment, Chinese scholars are more likely to label a broad US policy as containment. In addition, more encouraging to US-Sino relations is that although many perceived the US to be implementing a containment effort against China, they share a common view that China should for the time being continue to engage with the US as well as region and continue its peaceful development for mutual-benefits.

Second, many Chinese scholars who discuss containment conceive the US sees China as a threat. Due to this threat, whether militarily, economically or politically, the US is seen as trying to constrain this threat from jeopardizing a US presence around the world.

Third, the US is pursuing its own interests and seeks to maintain its hegemony. As these observers perceive it, China is a rising country.

Fourth, more recently, China's rise in global status allows it to be less constrained to a perceived containment theory. As China's insecurities are turned into confidence, scholars are less receptive to believe that the US is able to contain China. While this is mostly observed in terms of economic containment, as China's military strengthens, more scholars state a military containment strategy would fail.

Most Chinese scholars who discuss containment view the US interference with China's core interests as limiting China's diplomacy and growth<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, these perceptions vary over time depending on the relationship between the US, as well as China's neighbors. When China's neighbors adhere to China's “good neighbor policy”, scholars pay little attention to their involvement in the US grand strategy. Yet, when these countries begin to strengthen economic and military relations with the US, scholars interpret it as a willingness to join a perceived containment effort.

With China's economic affairs growing faster than its military, it is less common to hear about economic containment. In the future, if China's army continues to modernize as a force similar to the US, it will be interesting if this confidence will negate future fears, or instead, lead to conflict.

Additionally, although talk of containment is becoming more prevalent, PRC response has been relatively benign. Besides a few verbal protests every so often, the PRC

5 See Chen (2001).

6 Core issues are territorial interests like the South and China Sea, Taiwan, and China's diplomacy with its neighbors.

leadership continues to engage in diplomatic dialogues with the US, especially in terms of economics. On the other hand, some may see China's recent efforts in the South China sea as a means to break through this perceived containment effort under Xi Jinping.

As with any threat perception, the more dominant the perception is accepted in the public sphere, the greater chance the threat perception will begin to shape relations and public opinion. Therefore both sides should actively reduce misunderstandings and threat perceptions that lead to a flourishing belief of containment that can lead to miscalculations in growing relations.

### Articles Used From Sample

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