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**What about China? Will there be
a Long Telegram for the EU?**

What about China? Will there be a Long Telegram for the EU?

Abstract:

Kennan's famous Long Telegram, which inspired the containment response to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, is a lesson in how to elaborate a strategy to cope with geopolitical challenges of great magnitude and complexity. In rereading it we get amazed by the farsightedness of the young American diplomat.

A similar document would now be needed to meet the challenges presented by a revisionist China. We face serious security policy dilemmas for the Western nations. Whatever the course of action chosen by Washington, the only alternative that invites hope is a courageous commitment to a federal EU. Their individual States no longer have enough geopolitical critical mass to master their own destiny.

Keywords:

Long Telegram, Kennan, USSR, containment, China, U.S. EU, strategy, security.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

¿Y China qué? ¿Habrá un Telegrama Largo para la UE?

Resumen:

El famoso Telegrama Largo de Kennan, que sirvió de inspiración a la respuesta de contención frente a la Unión Soviética durante la Guerra Fría, es toda una lección de cómo elaborar una estrategia ante retos geopolíticos de gran magnitud y complejidad. Al releerlo no podemos dejar de asombrarnos por la clarividencia del joven diplomático norteamericano.

Ahora se necesitaría otro documento similar para afrontar el desafío presentado por una China revisionista. Nos enfrentamos a serios dilemas para las estrategias de seguridad de las naciones occidentales. Sea cual fuere la línea de acción escogida por Washington, la única alternativa que invita a la esperanza es a una valiente apuesta por una UE de corte federal. Sus Estados por separado ya no tienen masa crítica geopolítica suficiente para ser dueños de su propio destino.

Palabras clave:

Telegrama Largo, Kennan, URSS, contención, China, EE. UU., UE, estrategia, seguridad.

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Introduction

Josep Piqué recently wrote in *Política Exterior* that 'the US and the West urgently need a clear roadmap, a new "long telegram" to face the challenge presented by China¹'. The timing could not have been better. This year marks two anniversaries, the 75th anniversary of the writing of the Long Telegram and the 30th anniversary of the dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR), two closely linked events. The Soviet collapse was, to a large extent, a consequence of the containment strategy proposed by George Kennan, with the singularity that when rereading today both that diplomatic missive and the article entitled 'The Source of Soviet Conduct', published a year later in *Foreign Affairs* under the pseudonym 'X', one cannot fail to be amazed by the foresight of the then young American chargé d'affaires.

In the Long Telegram sent from Moscow on 22 February 1946, Kennan analyses in detail the strategic worldview and personality of Stalin's USSR, a product of Soviet Communist Party (CPSU) ideology and Russian historical experience, and concludes that the United States faces 'a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with US there can be no permanent *modus vivendi* that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken, if Soviet power is to be secure²'.

Bearing in mind that 'Soviets are still by far the weaker force' and that they were patient, flexible and 'highly sensitive to logic of force', the US diplomat proposed containment as a long-term course of action, placing great confidence 'health and vigour of our own society', in its methods and conceptions of human society'. It was the very contradictions of the Kremlin's iron-fisted power system that were to undermine the foundations of the dangerous rival in the emerging Cold War. Thus the solid tower of the communist bloc would eventually collapse under its own weight.

The great geostrategic dilemma today is how to meet the challenge presented by China, the emerging great power whose rise in all spheres is transforming the main parameters by which global power relations interact and are interpreted. Of course, the key issue is

¹ PIQUE, Josep. 'The US needs a "long telegram" on China'. *Política Exterior*, 5 February 2021.

<https://www.politicaexterior.com/eeuu-necesita-un-telegrama-largo-sobre-china/>

² KENNAN George F. 'The Long Telegram', 22 February 1946. Quotes below are all taken from this document.

how the question is posed in the US. The EU and Spain must therefore find their place in the light of this, as well as their own considerations.

The issue is doubly important because, after the unquestionable victory of overcoming the Cold War and the first decade of US hegemonism that followed, since 9/11, an overly optimistic West confident in its own capabilities and references seems to have lost the compass to find the most appropriate response to the strategic challenges that have emerged. Jessica T. Mathews presents it in stark language in *Foreign Affairs*: ‘When people elsewhere look at Washington’s track record over the past two decades, they don’t see confident leadership. What they see, instead, are a series of disasters authored by Washington, chief among them the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the subsequent destabilization of much of the Middle East and the 2008 global financial crisis³.’

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the lessons that can be learned from George Kennan’s brilliant strategy generation process and to reflect on how a wise analysis of a situation ‘so intricate, so delicate, so strange to our form of thought’ can lay the foundations for a successful strategic design, applied in this case to relations with the Asian giant. The conclusion is that only with a truly integrated and strong federal EU can we even think of having a strategy that is up to the task.

Soviet strategic worldview

For the learned and profound connoisseur of both Russian history and culture, and of the USSR at that time, the political personality of Soviet power was the product of Marxist ideology in its own interpretation and application, and of the circumstances of the power exercised for almost three decades in Russia. Capitalism (thought the Soviet political elite) not only bore the seeds of its own self-destruction, but would oppose the triumph of proletarian revolution wherever it arose, so that imperialism—the final phase of capitalism—inevitably led to war: hence the innate antagonism between capitalism and socialism. However, ‘theory of the inevitability of the eventual fall of capitalism has the

³ Mathews, Jessica T., ‘Present at the Re-creation? U.S. Foreign Policy Must Be Remade, Not Restored.’ *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2021.

fortunate connotation that there is no hurry about it', the Kremlin could therefore be patient and flexible in the struggle against antagonistic powers⁴.

These precepts were reinforced by the lessons of Russian history from centuries of dark battles against nomadic forces on the vast unfortified plains of the steppe. 'Here caution, circumspection, flexibility and deception are the valuable qualities; and their value finds natural appreciation in the Russian or the oriental mind. Thus the Kremlin has no compunction about retreating in the face of superior force.'

The circumstances of the immediate post-revolutionary period—civil war and foreign intervention, together with the obvious fact that the communists represented only a small minority of the Russian people—required the establishment of dictatorial power, sustained by a ruthless repressive apparatus. Internal and external opposition meant that the mechanisms of terror were consolidated. This, together with the extremely harsh experience of World War II, left society exhausted and demotivated. Additionally, Marxism, which had the system of production at the centre of the interpretation of all reality, was very inefficient precisely because of its production model. Ideological rigidity and repressive logic meant that a 'fiction has been canonized in Soviet philosophy by the excesses already committed in its name'.

At the same time, its concept of power, which did not allow for any autonomous organisation outside the CPSU itself, required its leadership to be the sole repository of truth, which translated into the infallibility of the Kremlin and the iron discipline of the Party. 'This means that truth is not a constant but is actually created, for all intents and purposes, by the Soviet leaders themselves' according to needs, with stubborn orientation to the ultimate goal of revolutionary triumph. Once the CPSU had established a certain line of action, the entire governmental machinery moved inexorably in that direction. 'The accumulative effect of these factors is to give to the whole subordinate apparatus of Soviet power an unshakable stubbornness and steadfastness in its orientation.' Since neither logic of reason nor common purposes could be appealed to, neither was it possible to find common mental approaches. For this reason, 'facts speak louder than words to the ears of the Kremlin'.

⁴ X (KENNAN, George F.): 'The Source of Soviet Conduct.' *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947. Quotes in this section are all taken from this document.

'These considerations make Soviet diplomacy at once easier and more difficult to deal with than the diplomacy of individual aggressive leaders like Napoleon and Hitler.' On the one hand, it was more sensitive to the opposing force, more willing to yield in certain areas when it felt that force was too strong, and therefore more rational in the logic of power. On the other, it could not be easily defeated or discouraged by a single victory of its opponents. 'The Russians look forward to a duel of infinite duration, and they see that already they have scored great successes'.

Response strategy

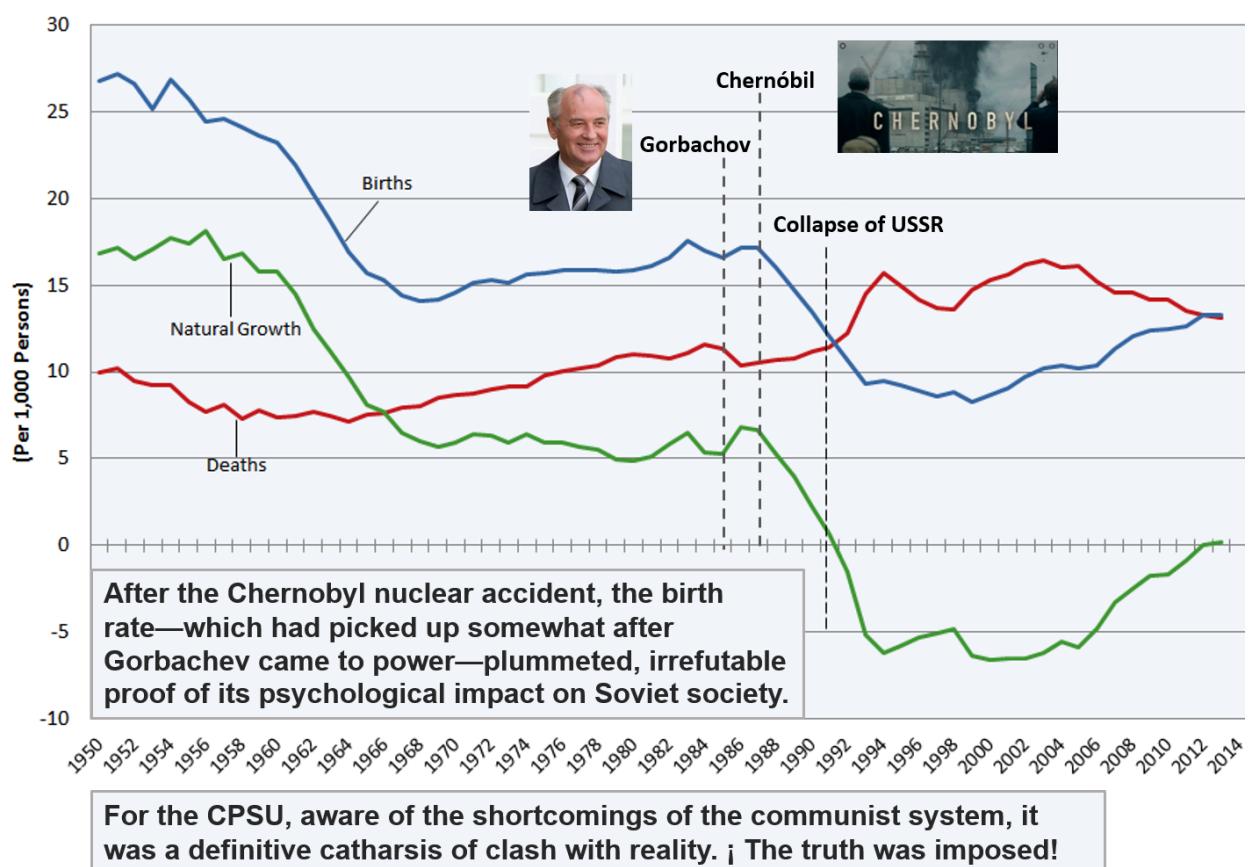
In Kennan's view, 'the patient persistence by which it is animated means that it can be effectively countered not by sporadic acts which represent the momentary whims of democratic opinion but only by intelligent long-range policies on the part of Russia's adversaries — policies no less steady in their purpose, and no less variegated and resourceful in their application, than those of the Soviet Union itself⁵.' A point would eventually be reached where even the cruellest dictatorship would have to yield to the economic and psychological reality of an inefficient and demoralised society in increasing contradiction to its ideological postulates.

The main uncertainty about political life in the USSR stemmed from the moments of transfer of power from one individual or group of individuals to another. 'It must be surmised from this that even within so highly disciplined an organization as the Communist Party there must be a growing divergence in age, outlook and interest between the great mass of Party members, only so recently recruited into the movement, and the little self-perpetuating clique of men at the top.' The eventual rejuvenation of higher spheres of authority, which would only be a matter of time, could take place quietly and peacefully, but 'whether rivals in the quest for higher power will not eventually reach down into these politically immature and inexperienced masses in order to find support for their respective claims?' If this were to happen, there could be strange consequences for the Communist Party because most of its members knew only the practices of discipline and iron obedience and not the arts of compromise and agreement.

⁵ Ibīdem.

In particular, the American diplomat believed—as was indeed the case with Gorbachev, especially after the Chernobyl disaster (Figure 1), where Party leadership itself lost faith in its ideological assumptions—that if the unity of the CPSU, and consequently its effectiveness as a political instrument, were damaged, ‘Soviet Russia might be changed overnight from one of the strongest to one of the weakest and most pitiable of national societies’.

Figure 1: Changes in Russia's main demographic indicators from 1950 to 2014



Source: Prepared internally

Moreover, vis-à-vis the Western world, Russia remained by far the weaker party. Soviet policy was highly flexible, but Soviet society had shortcomings that would progressively weaken its full potential, ‘This would of itself warrant the United States entering with reasonable confidence upon a policy of firm containment, designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counterforce at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interest of a peaceful and stable world’.

US policy should not simply hold the line and hope for the best. The United States must influence internal developments both within Russia and the international communist movement, to create in the world ‘the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems 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’, because the ‘palsied decrepitude of the capitalist world is the keystone of Communist philosophy’. In contrast, ‘the aims of Russian Communism must appear sterile and quixotic, the hopes and enthusiasm of Moscow’s supporters must wane, and added strain must be imposed on the Kremlin’s foreign policies’. Similarly, signs of indecision, disunity and internal disintegration within the US would have a stimulating effect on the entire communist movement.

Thus, Washington, by greatly increasing the tensions under which Soviet policy operated, would impose a much greater degree of restraint and circumspection on the Kremlin to promote trends that would encourage either the break-up or the gradual softening of Soviet power. ‘No mystical, messianic movement—and particularly not that of the Kremlin—can face frustration indefinitely without eventually adjusting itself in one way or another to the logic of that state of affairs’.

The decision therefore rested largely with the American great power. ‘The issue of Soviet-American relations is in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States as a nation among nations. To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation’.

China is not the Soviet Union

According to Kevin Rudd, former Prime Minister of Australia, one of the few things Washington and Beijing agree on these days is that the contest between the two countries will enter a decisive phase in the next few years, the decade of living dangerously. ‘No matter what strategies the two sides pursue or what events unfold, the tension between the United States and China will grow, and competition will intensify; it is inevitable. War, however, is not⁶.’

⁶ RUDD, Kevin. ‘Short of War. How to Keep U.S.-Chinese Confrontation From Ending in Calamity’. *Foreign Affairs*, March-April 2021.

While Washington sees China's advances as a challenge to the current international system and its leadership, Beijing perceives US actions as an effort to prevent China's development, and ultimately also as a threat to the CCP's governing position. Disputes over trade, technology, the South China Sea, Taiwan and Hong Kong are recent examples of the deteriorating Sino-US relationship with global implications that may put pressure on other states to take a stand in the struggle between the two giants⁷.

The dilemma in the West is therefore threefold: avoid the catastrophe that would result from a war between the great powers at all costs, design a strategy that would prevent China's rise to global primacy and, if this is not possible at a reasonable price, to find the best possible fit in the international order that would result from the emergence of the Asian giant, which would mean the definitive end of an international order shaped by Western-inspired democratic ideals.

In comparing the situation brought about by the USSR with the current challenge of China's emergence, we must begin by recognising that Beijing would indeed be willing to find a *modus vivendi*, if only because it would pave its way to becoming the world's leading power. 'The Chinese Communist Party is increasingly confident that by the decade's end, China's economy will finally surpass that of the United States as the world's largest in terms of GDP at market exchange rates. Meanwhile, China continues to advance on other fronts, as well⁸.' Washington, on the other hand, believes that policies of engagement with China have not yielded the expected results and fears that any *modus vivendi* will ultimately doom what remains of the liberal international order, opening the way to a highly uncertain international system in which Washington and Beijing compete for global leadership on terms increasingly favourable to China.

On the other hand, when Deng Xiaoping stated: "It doesn't matter whether a cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice", brought the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) back in touch with reality and gave primacy to policy effectiveness over ideology⁹. The current Chinese state is not built on a great falsehood, even if many of its premises collide with the Western view of things and, in particular, of human rights. The CCP has a discourse

⁷ ALMÉN, Oscar, ENGLUND, Johan, OTTOSSON, Björn. 'Great Power Perceptions How China and the U.S view each other on political, economic and security issues'. FOI-R--5040—SE, January 2021. [FOIR5040.pdf](#).

⁸ RUDD, Kevin. Doc. cit.

⁹ SHAMBAUGH, David, YAHUDA, Michael, *International Relations of Asia*, Rowman & Littlefield, second edition, 2014.

that the people understand and a project for recovering lost greatness that the nation shares. Chinese pragmatism also implies that Beijing, unlike Soviet Moscow, has no vested interest in promoting a particular ideology or model.

Over the past four decades, the Red Dragon, which has learned important lessons from what went wrong in the USSR, has made a dramatic leap in the living conditions of the population, giving it enormous legitimacy in the eyes of its citizens, with popular support of close to 80%. Nationalism, instigated by the CCP, which instrumentalises the century of humiliations, is generating great cohesion of the Chinese nation behind its leaders. And today, China's society can be considered more resilient than the US one, fractured after the Trump era and tired of its international responsibilities.

It is therefore pointless to engage in a containment strategy. In this case, it is the American great power that is acting under time pressure and there is no compelling reason to predict the collapse of China, a society with many contradictions—none insurmountable—but which in recent decades has shown an astonishing ability to overcome the difficulties that have come its way.

The most vulnerable points for the Chinese regime are the separatist aspirations of the Sinkiang and Tibet territories, against which the PRC has imposed a relentless repressive policy, and the potential for democratising movements to take root that could challenge the CCP's legitimacy. It is aware of this and has equipped itself with highly advanced means of population control. At the same time, to better cope with other powers that would oppose its unstoppable rise, Xi Jinping has concentrated much power in himself and calls for the CCP to close ranks around his leadership.

Washington fears Chinese expansionism—at least in its immediate vicinity and reunification with Taiwan—something that has characterised almost all previous dominant powers, including the US. China, a victim of the expansionist ambitions of Western powers—in addition to those of Japan and Russia—from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, is immune to the moral considerations of Washington or European capitals. However, being a major trading power, Beijing needs a reasonably stable international context.

A confrontational strategy?

An anonymous paper by a former US government official with extensive knowledge and experience in China, published under the revealing title *The Longer Telegram*, proposes a comprehensive strategy, detailing how to implement it, that invite comparison with George Kennan's historical document¹⁰.

Based on the conviction that 'China's rise, because of the scale of its economy and its military, the speed of its technological advancement, and its radically different worldview than that of the United States, now profoundly impacts every major US national interest', and that, 'Xi is no longer just a problem for US primacy and presents a serious problem for the whole of the democratic world', the author advocates a confrontational response, calling on all of Washington's allies to force China back to the strategic *status quo* before Xi Jinping.

It would be extremely dangerous, he argues, to pose a China strategy based on the assumption that the Chinese system is inevitably destined to collapse from within, much less to make the 'overthrow of the Communist Party' the goal of such a strategy. It must seize the opportunities presented by division within the Party over Xi Jinping's leadership and his vast ambitions. 'Senior party members have been greatly troubled by Xi's policy direction and angered by his endless demands for absolute loyalty. They fear for their own lives and the future livelihoods of their families. Of particular political toxicity in this mix are the reports unearthed by international media of the wealth amassed by Xi's family and members of his political inner circle, despite the vigour with which Xi has conducted the anti-corruption campaign¹¹'.

The central focus should therefore be on the fault lines in Chinese domestic politics in general and in relation to Xi's leadership in particular, in order to 'China's political elite to collectively conclude that it is in the country's best interests to continue to operate within the existing US-led liberal international order rather than build a rival order, and that it is in the party's best interests, if it wishes to remain in power at home, not to attempt to expand China's borders or export its political model beyond China's shores'¹².

¹⁰'The Longer Telegram: Toward A New American China Strategy'. The Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Atlantic Council strategy papers, 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Longer-Telegram-Toward-A-New-American-China-Strategy.pdf>.

¹¹ Ibīdem.

¹² Ibīdem.

To be effective, according to the unknown author, the United States, in full coordination with key allies for joint action in response to China, must address China's domestic economic and institutional weaknesses, appealing to Clinton's famous dictum: "It's the economy, stupid!" Additionally, 'the United States must rebalance its relationship with Russia whether it likes it or not'.

This is an undoubtedly intelligent approach that proposes the very thing the PRC is accused of and which requires a broad front of democratic allies to put their trust and their future in Washington's hands.

However, it seems counterproductive because it would most likely achieve the opposite of what it intends, further fuelling the spiral of rivalry. To bow to American pressure would mean the PRC accepting the moral superiority and leadership of the Western great power, something that is repugnant to the Chinese mentality, especially coming after the treatment Imperial China received during the century of humiliation. Now, having moved beyond the developmental and low-profile phase that Deng foresaw as necessary, China feels strong and believes that the time has come to return to historical normality.

Nor is the Washington establishment likely to readily embrace a policy of engagement with Russia, without which the chances of success would fall drastically. Finally, both Western and Asian allies are being asked to entrust their economic development and security to a gamble that would put them all under great pressure and, in case of failure, leave the most vulnerable states at the feet of the Chinese horses.

Any strategy aimed at halting the emergence of the PRC and forcing it to return to the previous international order would have much in common with this questionable if intellectually suggestive attempt to meet the challenge presented by a revisionist China. Any such option would have the disadvantage that, should it fail to achieve its objective—which is quite likely given that the US's Asian allies do not wish to align strategic and economic positions as indicated by the recent signing of RCEP¹³—would leave a geopolitical landscape that is even more tense, highly inflammable and increasingly difficult to address.

¹³ REINSCH, William Alan, CAPORAL, Jack. 'At Last, An RCEP Deal'. CSIS Critical Questions, 3 December 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/last-rcep-deal>.

The ‘Strategic Survey 2019’ already stated: ‘The rules-based global order is now the object of Western strategic nostalgia¹⁴’. Attempting to rewind the last decade of the evolution of the international order to go back to square one is unrealistic and contrary to the most elementary wisdom.

However, we cannot relent from the effort to ensure that the global panorama is configured in the best possible way, without renouncing, at least where there is the necessary consensus, values and references that have allowed for high levels of peace and development—including of China—and lack a better alternative.

In the face of the difficult dilemmas we face, the only alternative that offers hope is a courageous commitment to a federal EU. Their individual states no longer have sufficient geopolitical critical mass to control their own destiny. However, whether by maintaining a more assertive stance towards China or by opting for coexistence, a strong Europe with its own geopolitical personality would itself contribute to balancing China and would be in a better position both to join forces with the US and to defend itself against the ambitions of a dominant China.

Conclusion

In rereading both ‘The Long Telegram’ and ‘The Source of Soviet Conduct’, one cannot fail to be struck by George Kennan’s farsightedness, by the depth of his psychological and ideological analysis of the political elite that ruled the USSR with an iron fist, by the wisdom he shows in devising the strategy of containment, and by the accuracy of his prediction of how the Soviet empire would succumb.

The USSR was a system of power convinced of antagonism between the revolutionary forces, of which it considered itself the vanguard, and capitalist societies, which would do everything possible to perpetuate their system of exploitation of the proletariat. Persuaded that history was on its side, the CPSU was very flexible and patient in facing this battle. Truth, in the service of the revolutionary project, was subject to all sorts of manipulations, which made it refractory to reason but sensitive to the logic of facts.

At the same time, beset from within and without, the Bolsheviks had set up a ruthless dictatorship, imprisoned by a spiral of internal repression. The combination of ideological

¹⁴‘Strategic Survey 2019’. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), October 2019.

rigidity and the rule of terror drained the energies of society, neglected many of the needs of the population and in the very long run the communist regime would become unsustainable. Sooner or later, the truth would come out and by looking into the mirror they would discover the monster.

Gorbachev believed he could correct the course, but divisions within the Party—as the American diplomat had predicted—with the invaluable contribution of the Chernobyl accident, led to the debacle and the house of cards collapsed.

Xi Jinping's China, unlike the USSR, has a coherent discourse that the people understand and a project of recovering lost greatness that the heart of the nation—the Han people—shares. The PRC has been able to solve the material problems of its people and therefore enjoys popular support of around 80%.

As it anticipated that the United States would resist its rise to the pinnacle of world power, the CCP has appealed to nationalism and instrumentalised the century of humiliations to close ranks against outside interference. Repressive policy in peripheral territories and increasing control of the population in general are defensive attitudes to the perceived threat that democratic ideas pose to territorial integrity, national cohesion and CCP leadership. The result is a determined and resilient China, ready to regain its lost centrality, confident in its size and the vitality of its economy, but not seeking to impose its own model on others.

Time is on its side and the political regime is in full control of the Asian giant. There does not seem to be any guaranteed strategy that would allow us to think of stopping its rise at a reasonable price. It will hardly be possible to dictate to the PRC what it should do within its borders, but the world is still very big and there are many actors who will continue to influence historical developments.

The battle is on, the dynamics of classical geopolitics come into play, but there are also competing immaterial factors of values, beliefs and ideologies, as well as the effectiveness of different models of society.

In this context, the EU must recognise that there is a ‘short telegram’ for it: ‘Either it becomes truly integrated, with a geopolitical personality of its own, or it is in danger of becoming an object of archaeological interest’. Coupled with Western nations being true to the values of justice, freedom and human dignity that are the essence of the civilisation

to which they belong, there is hope for the future, regardless of what China does or does not do.

Kennan's words remain valid, in an extended sense, when he expressed 'a certain gratitude to a Providence which, by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear¹⁵'.

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¹⁵ X (KENNAN, George F.): 'The Source of Soviet Conduct.' *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947.