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**The new approach to Western
containment versus Russia**[Visit the WEBSITE](#)[Receive the E-NEWSLETTER](#)*The new approach to Western containment versus Russia**Abstract:*

The package of measures and initiatives launched by NATO, complemented by those designed by the European Union, in the face of Russian foreign policy in Europe, is being described by many Western analysts and academics as a new policy of containment, or “neocontention”. This name refers us to George F. Kennan's analysis and recommendations at the beginning of the Cold War on the Soviet threat and foreign policy that had to be played to oppose it. This document asks whether the analysis that was done then has applications in the current situation, and what lessons could be obtained from it.

Keywords:

NATO, Russia, European Union, deterrence, George F. Kennan, Cold War, neocontention

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Un nuevo enfoque sobre la contención occidental frente a Rusia

Resumen:

El conjunto de medidas e iniciativas puestas en marcha por la OTAN, a las que complementan las diseñadas por la Unión Europea, frente a política exterior rusa en Europa, está siendo calificado por muchos analistas y académicos occidentales como nueva política de contención, o <neocontención>. Dicha denominación nos remite al análisis y recomendaciones que George F. Kennan realizó al comienzo de la Guerra Fría, sobre la amenaza soviética y la política exterior que se debía practicar para oponerse a ella. El presente documento se pregunta si el análisis que se hizo entonces tiene aplicaciones en la situación actual y cuáles son las lecciones que se pudieran obtener.

Palabras clave:

OTAN, Rusia, Unión Europea, disuasión, George F. Kennan, Guerra Fría, neocontención.

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INTRODUCTION

It is often characteristic of each generation to think that the challenges it faces are very different from those that preceded it. However, in the face of what NATO and the European Union (EU) see as the new threat that Russia now poses to the Western bloc, there are those who advocate a return to the containment strategy that was once implemented against the expanding dominance of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc. We could ask ourselves whether the situation is the same today and therefore whether the same recipe would also produce satisfactory results. In order to be able to respond, it is useful to analyse the above strategy in context, to draw out the lessons learned and to see which would be applicable to the current situation.

THE CONTAINMENT STRATEGY

At the beginning of the Cold War, the United States (US) decided to devise a strategy based on the ideas contained in the so-called *long telegram*¹, a message from the diplomat George F. Kennan, then assigned to the US delegation in Moscow, as well as in a subsequent article published in *Foreign Affairs* magazine and signed as "Mr. X"², in which he set out what Washington's foreign policy should be in the face of what he saw as the danger of Soviet expansionism. Kennan believed that the Soviet Union would not embark on an adventurous conquest (as Nazi Germany had done), but would respond more to a logic of force, advancing where it could, but retreating where it met stiff resistance.

This reasoning led to the establishment of the so-called 'strategy of containment', which, led by the US, was supported and practised by the entire Western bloc and its allies in Asia, Ibero-America and Africa. This strategy did not, in principle, require large military forces, since for Kennan it was more important to use tools from the diplomatic, economic, social and even psychological spheres. Indeed, in his writings he warned of the Soviet (communist) ability to undermine public confidence by exacerbating political divisions between and within states through propaganda and subversion. To counteract them, it

¹ *Telegram, George Kennan to George Marshall ("Long Telegram")*, available at http://www.trumanlibrary.com/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/6-6.pdf, accessed 25 June 2020.

² *The Source of Soviet Conduct*, George F. Kennan, *Foreign Affairs* (25) 1947, available at <http://www.foreignaffaires.com/articles/russian-federation/1947-07-01/sources-soviet-conduct>, accessed 25 June 2020.

was important to improve socio-economic conditions, projecting an image of public confidence in each nation's political system.

Thus, the Marshall Plan (1948) aimed at the economic recovery of Western Europe, which would help neutralise propaganda and facilitate the fight against subversion (by making more resources available), increasing the resilience of Western societies and making them less permeable to agitation from the communist bloc.

But before long the strategy of containment was forced to dramatically raise its military profile. The Berlin blockade and subsequent establishment of the Iron Curtain, the development of nuclear weaponry by the Soviets, the fall of China into the communist bloc, the Korean War, etc., forged the idea that containment, if not backed by assertive and quantifiable military superiority, would not be credible on its own. An arms race immediately ensued, with particular emphasis on nuclear weapons and their means of delivery, requiring large defence budgets, along with aggressive employment strategies and doctrines.

From then on, the entire Western effort, led by the US, was directed at containing Soviet and/or communist expansionism, relegating to the background the other tools that Kennan felt should be implemented simultaneously and which he believed should take the lead.

THE CURRENT STATE OF THE THREAT

Many Western analysts see similarities between the threat posed by the Soviet Union in its time and the threat posed by today's Russia:

- Leaders on both sides brand each other as adversaries, adopting the narrative of “the threat” that the other poses to their respective security and defence domains.
- Then as now, there is a clear hostility towards the Western bloc fuelled by Russia's traditional preoccupation with maintaining a buffer between its borders and those of NATO, which in turn feeds its political self-isolation.
- The Russian threat is also political in nature, as it would seek to weaken the coherence and cohesion of NATO and the EU, helping to fracture the Euro-Atlantic area, either by creating dividing lines or by deepening and widening existing ones. Clearly, it would no longer be driven by the messianic idea of spreading communism, but by geostrategic pragmatism, which is far more effective in

exploiting the weaknesses of the adversary, helping to undermine the confidence of Western societies in their political systems and disrupting their processes. In this way, while it would no longer seek to foment revolutions across the globe, it would seek to weaken Western societies in order to diminish their resilience.

- Moscow does not appear to pose an existential threat of military invasion in Central Europe and the Balkans, but considers it essential to its national security to maintain a sphere of influence in the area. However, the threat against the Baltic states does seem more credible, as has already been demonstrated in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 (although these incursions may well have been provoked to prevent them from joining the Atlantic Alliance, impossible as long as they have internal conflicts, as required by the Washington Treaty).
- The results of Russia's intervention in Syria have demonstrated its ability to use military tools. Constant provocations in Western airspace and seas, along with various cyber attacks, reinforce this view.
- Moreover, its proven ability to prevail by integrating the broad spectrum of activities that encompass the so-called 'hybrid threat' (military, diplomatic, economic, cyber, information operations, etc.), all of which fall below the threshold of open conflict, makes it a significant adversary.
- During the Cold War, like-minded political parties were the pawns Moscow used to penetrate Western societies. Today, there is also a political spectrum susceptible to penetration by its information operations³, albeit broader and more diverse, ranging from extreme right-wing political parties to anti-establishment movements on the far left. Their audiences listen to conspiracy theories, fake news and the questioning of real facts, contributing to Western political polarisation and undermining confidence in their institutions and systems. These measures are cleverly combined and enhanced by the opportunities and impunity provided by cyberspace, with the advantage of the difficulty of attribution.
- But the most worrying of the similarities is the reappearance of *proxy conflicts*, in which third party actors are pitted against each other, supported by one side or the other. It is clear to everybody that the danger of this is not only the progressive destabilisation of regional areas that could drag more actors into the maelstrom,

³ Operations similar to those envisaged by NATO in its Communication Strategy and different from the concept of operations that INFO OPS coordinates at the military level.

but also the possibility of an uncontrolled military escalation that could lead to a conflict between great powers.

It is evident that the aforementioned similarities pale into insignificance when we put in black and white the enormous disparity in resources between the Western bloc and Russia, in economic, diplomatic, demographic, military and technological terms (to name the most relevant). Moreover, Russia is no longer the predominant power in Asia, having been displaced by China. But even so, Russia remains capable of countering and even surpassing the West in the geographical areas of its periphery, is one of the world's two nuclear superpowers, has veto power in the UN Security Council, and its technological capabilities give it enormous resources in cyberspace (giving it a global reach) and place it among the most prominent players in outer space.

But even if we accept the rhetoric that we have somehow returned to a situation that harks back to the Cold War, the domestic and global contexts are very different from that period. Despite the divergent and competing narratives, with sanctions and counter-sanctions imposed, there is no denying the enormous interconnectedness between the West and Russia, and both with China, at the level of commerce, economy, energy, culture, etc. Indeed, the clashing rhetoric in ideological debates on human rights, democracy, international law, cybersecurity, etc., is a far cry from the ideological gulf that separated the Cold War blocs. Cooperation is also taking place in many fields (terrorism, space technology, organised crime, arms trafficking, nuclear proliferation, etc.) at global and regional level. And this cooperation continues to take place in spite of a climate of progressively deteriorating political relations because the global economy and globalisation are forcing the West and Russia to become much more connected and thus interdependent. A clear example of this is the purchase and use of the Russian vaccine by EU members, despite Brussels' initial reluctance to recognise its merits⁴, or the energy dependence of Central and Eastern European countries.

⁴ Sputnik in Europe: What Russia's vaccine could mean for European health sovereignty, Joanna Hosa, 29 March 21, available at https://ecfr.eu/article/sputnik-in-europe-what-russias-vaccine-could-mean-for-european-health-sovereignty/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ecfr_general_newsletter, accessed 15 May 2021.

On the other hand, we can observe that Western allies and partners differ in their views on policy towards Russia. There are those who consider it an existential threat (mainly those that share a common border with the great power and do not belong to its sphere), among them the Baltic states and Poland, strongly supported by the US and the UK. But there are also dissenting voices, such as those of France and Germany (with the clear economic interests of the latter), who advocate greater dialogue and cooperation with Moscow, favouring détente, rejecting the rhetoric of a new Cold War. But even those allies that do not perceive a direct threat recognise that some containment must be exercised, given the importance of reassuring and ensuring Atlantic solidarity with Russia's closest neighbours.

A NEW FORM OF CONTAINMENT: NEO-CONTAINMENT

Thus, from a purely military point of view, Russia represents a certain regional threat in Europe, which therefore requires an appropriate level of deterrence of the same nature. This has been recognised by NATO, which since 2014 - immediately after the outbreak of the hybrid conflict in the Donbas and the annexation of Crimea - has launched a panoply of immediate military response initiatives and internal reorganisation measures. The aim of which is to raise the cost to Russia of any military venture in the Baltic states or Poland (or elsewhere in the Alliance), while also ensuring the Atlantic organisation's solidarity with these allies in the event of aggression.

It is not our aim to analyse the above-mentioned initiatives and measures carried out by the Alliance, for which numerous studies exist. All of them are guided by the idea that has been at the core of NATO since 2014 as the actions attributed to the other side (cyber attacks, air and maritime incursions, financing of political parties and leaders, propagation of fake news, disruption of electoral processes, massive military manoeuvres in nearby geographical areas...) have been occurring and increasing: the need to show firmness in the face of what is considered a reactivation of the threat from the East. The package of measures and initiatives aimed at demonstrating such firmness is being referred to by many Western analysts as the new policy of containment, or directly "neo-containment".

But where a very important part of the game is also being played - perhaps the most important part - is in the resilience of Western societies and their ability to act in an internally and externally cohesive manner, i.e. precisely where the tools that Kennan

considered essential should play their part. Because much of the West's resilience in the face of external disruption depends on the ability to fight the information war, dismantling the fake news, conspiracy theories and myths created to undermine trust and cohesion in societies. This is where greater cooperation with the other major European geopolitical actor, the European Union, is required, as the two can create far greater synergy than has hitherto been the case⁵. While also not the subject of our analysis, it is clear that the EU is providing a set of non-military tools (diplomatic, economic, regulatory, legislative, police, etc.) that NATO does not have. Cooperation between the two Western organisations would bring together most European countries outside the Russian sphere of control, along with the US and Canada.

THE ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS: UNDERSTANDING THE ADVERSARY AND STRATEGIC PATIENCE

Even adding to the military deterrence put in place by NATO and the enormous capabilities generated by the EU, we would still lack two fundamental elements for neo-containment to be adequately designed: understanding the Russian domestic situation and practising “strategic patience”. Again we have to refer to a careful reading of Kennan's advice of over 70 years ago, when he affirmed that the West should control the agenda, mindful that the challenge should be met by avoiding widespread military conflict. The US diplomat was convinced that deterrence would be the most effective policy to prevent a major conflict. But to avoid the latter, it was essential not to respond unnecessarily or disproportionately to every Soviet challenge, no matter how intolerable it might seem. The aim was to prevent an Allied overreaction from pushing the Kremlin into a situation that would force it to escalate, for fear of creating a domestic situation that would compel it to do so. This is an important and difficult point to calibrate, i.e. to distinguish histrionic political gestures or initiatives that try to show a supposed military, economic or diplomatic strength from a true threat. A Western tit-for-tat policy in response to any action taken by Moscow could risk putting Russia, or its leader, between a rock and a hard place, forcing them to keep up the momentum by upping the ante, even if common sense dictates

⁵ PONTIJAS CALDERÓN, José Luis. *The concept of resilience in NATO and the EU: room for cooperation*. Analysis Paper no. 65/2017. Available at: http://www.ieeee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2017/DIEEEA65-2017_Resiliencia_OTAN_UE_JLPC.pdf. (accessed on 25 June 2020).

otherwise. For, while the Kremlin would be willing to apply some flexibility by backing down where it encounters firm resistance, it would not do so if this would affect its domestic prestige, which could force it to escalate.

This last point is of great importance, because the situation today is very similar, but much more critical than it was then. As Russia increasingly becomes a personal project of a single leader surrounded by a tight clique, which in turn relies on a pyramid of socio-economic-political co-optation, the prestige of the leader and the consequences of the decisions he makes become more critical. This is particularly delicate, given the difficulty of controlling public opinion, because of the wide reach of social networks, despite the strict supervision that can be attempted over the cyberspace in which they operate.

It is therefore of the utmost importance that the Western bloc remains calm and sober in the face of what could be perceived as Russian provocations and threats. Thus, reactions to such provocations must be expressed in such a way as to always leave room for a retreat that does not substantially damage its internal prestige, whether in the face of Russian public opinion or the confidence of those on whom its power structure relies. Following Kennan's advice, the West should reapply strategic patience, waiting for the internal and/or external contradictions of its adversary to force it to take the path of détente.

Because these contradictions continue to exist: its society is fragmented, structural problems continue to weigh down its economy, which is still heavily dependent on the fluctuations of oil and gas prices, any major military setback could result in a drastic fall in the leader's prestige, We cannot forget that much of the popularity that propped up President Putin was acquired precisely by confronting the West in Ukraine and Syria⁶.

In this sense, we are seeing that the military initiatives put in place by NATO and the economic sanctions lifted by the EU seek precisely to show firmness and containment, avoiding unnecessary provocations that could reinforce a victimhood narrative of a supposed threat, justifying an escalation. It is essential to continue along this path, maintaining an appropriate balance between the need to show a cohesive and firm common front that makes deterrence credible, while keeping channels of communication open, to be able to establish selective cooperative agreements on those issues deemed

⁶ Treisman, Daniel. *What you need to know about Putin's popularity*. The Washington Post. Available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/02/07/what-to-know-about-putins-popularity/>. Accessed on 25 June 2020.

to be of mutual benefit and to resolve the disputes and clashes that are sure to continue to occur. The ultimate aim is to enable détente and even reconciliation, when circumstances permit.

Maintaining such a balance will be no easy task. There will always be, as there are today, political and military hawks and economic lobbying interests on both sides who will press for the implementation of more aggressive policies, on the grounds that to do otherwise will be understood by the adversary as a sign of weakness and acquiescence to the fait accompli. It is important for Westerners to bear in mind that, given the aforementioned disparity in resources between Russia and the West, Russian responses or provocations, however threatening they might appear at first, are merely a sign of weakness, attempting to show firmness in the face of those they recognise as more powerful.

On the other hand, assuming that the current Russian regime will easily collapse under internal pressure and desires to achieve Western-style democracy is a possibility that should be dismissed as a premise of strategic calculation. First, the West must repress any temptation to interfere in Russia's internal affairs, because the reaction it might provoke would be precisely the opposite, by feeding the Western threat narrative, thus reinforcing the power pyramid. Moreover, Russia's history, of which they are rightly proud, shows that it is a nation that has survived centuries of crises, wars, revolutions, famines, genocidal purges and invasions, rising from the ashes with astonishing speed. We must remember that for many Russians, democracy goes hand in hand with instability, economic hardship and national humiliation, so it is not easy for the advent of democracy to be brought about by social pressures in pursuit of socio-economic improvements. The Russian people have demonstrated throughout their history a resilience that is difficult to compare and certainly far superior to that of today's Western societies, so they will not easily collapse despite the severe hardships they are forced to face.

However, today's Russia still suffers from some of the vulnerabilities of its Soviet predecessor, which was forced to negotiate and ultimately collapsed when it could not afford to finance the very costly arms race with the US in particular and the West in general. Today's Russia is vulnerable to oil and gas price fluctuations primarily, and needs Western investment (including the lifting of economic sanctions against it) and access to its markets to boost and sustain its economy.

The formula for the West might therefore be strategic patience, coupled with firmness, containment and sobriety, avoiding interference in Russia's internal affairs. The

success of the Western bloc would thus lie in maintaining its internal cohesion in the face of the "divide and rule" policy, avoiding isolated initiatives that might seek partial gains, but also in such an approach being consistent over the long term and embracing many sectors of Western political and social life, offering an attractive and unquestionable alternative socially, economically and politically. Thus, neo-containment, to quote Kennan himself, would be pursued more through reaffirming the values of freedom and prosperity that characterise Western powers than in devising direct responses to Russian initiatives, while their own weaknesses work against them.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the tense situation that has been developing between the Western bloc and Russia since 2008 and especially since 2014, with the crisis in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, both NATO and the EU have launched a series of political, diplomatic, economic and military measures aimed at presenting a firm and cohesive front to deter any potential threat. It seems that US diplomat George F. Kennan's early Cold War assessment of Soviet foreign policy, along with his recommendations for designing a Western foreign policy to contain it, are still of value to Western policy-makers today in the face of the current Russian challenge.

For while Russia is weaker by far, in economic and demographic terms, than the Western bloc, this does not mean that it is incapable of acting effectively in its geographical environment and in cyberspace, the latter of which also provides it with global reach and almost unlimited capabilities to pursue a policy of *fait accompli*, backed by its enormous nuclear power and well-oiled military toolkit.

The Western response, framed within the framework of what is being called neo-containment, following the principles outlined by Kennan, should be governed by the principles of self-restraint, sobriety and proportionality. Its ultimate goal would be to achieve normalisation of relations, which requires the difficult task of breaking down the walls that open up a path for *détente*. To this end, it is important to maintain a firm and cohesive stance, avoiding reacting to any provocation that does not represent a certain threat, which could place decision-makers in the Kremlin in a blind alley, forcing them into an escalation that is dangerous for all and with an uncertain end.

While NATO and the EU already cooperate in the pursuit of a synergy that is essential for their complementarity, more platforms need to be streamlined into a much more effective team that will solidly reinforce the new policy of containment, neo-containment, that the West has decided to pursue with Russia.

A neo-containment that practises strategic patience, i.e. applied in the long term, keeping open sufficient channels of communication and cooperation on issues of mutual interest. Such neo-containment should be based on two fundamental pillars: the defence of the Western political model and its enormous economic, social, cultural, individual, etc. advantages, while neutralising messages that seek to exploit the flaws of the system by creating division among the components of the Atlantic security framework; on the other hand, demonstrating cohesion and firmness in the face of any military threat, but also self-restraint, avoiding falling into an 'eye for an eye' competition that could result in an uncontrolled spiral. All this while waiting for the moment when Russia's internal contradictions and weaknesses put it in such a position that it is forced to seek dialogue and détente.

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