

A NEW CONTAINMENT STRATEGY IN ASIA

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Abstract:

In an ever changing geopolitical environment the struggle for dominance remains a constant. Today we are on the edge of a new bi-polar world, but this time with the US and China as main actors. In this conjuncture each of these states will try to dominate and enlarge their sphere of influence, and, if possible to restrict the other part in expanding theirs. And it will also be a battle for acquiring allies. As such, rather than direct confrontation, the US policy towards China may aim to resurrect an old strategy of the Cold War, the containment of the enemy, adapted to the new realities. The idea is to institute a political blockade to prevent the Chinese enlargement of its reach, especially in Asia and Africa. In this endeavour, the US needs strong allies in Asia, and the best candidates are the countries that have a democratic regime, mainly Japan, South Korea, Australia and India. The theoretical concept stipulates that a "quadrilateral of democracies" can be created from these states, with the US in the role of the organizer and promoter of this non-formal alliance. Its purpose would be to stop the advancing Chinese influence in South East Asia by creating a barrier against Chinese hegemony and a counter-pole of attraction. Of course, should this task prove effective, other states may join as well? The main beneficiary of this construct would be the USA, because the barrier would represent the first line of defence for Washington's interests in the Pacific area.

Keywords: *China, containment, democracies, doctrine, geopolitics, United States.*

Introduction

The geopolitical landscape of the world tends once again to seek its balance, be it in a multi-polar or a bi-polar version. Settling down the waters of uncertainty is a rather natural phenomenon, as prolonged turmoil is not beneficial in the long run for most of the countries. Both

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scenarios are plausible, but are not of equal value in terms of probability. At this moment of moderate-to serious uncertainty it may appear that the world could indeed have 3 or 4 big actors on the political and military arena, naming the United States, China, the Russian Federation and maybe the European Union, depending on the internal level of cohesion and the political power that is portrayed in the outside (Olivié & Gracia, May 2020, p. 39). But in the medium and long term it is most likely that the international stage will segregate again into 2 opposite factions, like it did in the post-war period. Judging by actual vectors of power the main antagonists appears to be China and the US, and consequently each one will try to find important allies to deter the other side in pursuing its initiatives. Also it needs to be stressed that since the 2nd World Conflagration the concept of “war” evolved and in modern times it should not be understood just as a simple confrontation between two armies, but as a clash of political and economic systems, a clash where the armed forces are just the instruments of exerting power.

This paper aims to shed some light on one particular part of this “geopolitical dance-floor”, meaning the contest for regional domination in South-East and East Asia, as well as in the Pacific Area. The study focuses on one possible measure that could be adopted by the US in its effort to stop the Chinese influence and hegemony.

This measure consists in sustaining a form of a non-official agreement of the democratic countries in Asia (conveniently including Australia, even if geographically it is not Asia, it is economically tied up with this continent), with the main purpose of reducing China's economic and political grasp over their own countries as well as the other smaller countries. Simply put it would be an alliance based on the principle “strength in numbers”, and through this would benefit both the countries directly involved, and the United States. The idea is simple and was used before, in the Cold War with USSR - rather than face the enemy in direct combat and risk a lot of lives and resources, better use containment barrier to stop its advance. Such a strategy is simple in theory, but much harder to implement. Practically we are talking about a geo-political corridor made of the four main powers that have a democratic regime in Asia: Japan, South Korea, Australia and India,

which would make a so called “Quadrilateral of Democracies” that could partially encircle China. It is not about a proxy war conducted by the US, but a form of “fencing” the Chinese ambitions. In some other variants in the literature, the Quadrilateral would be composed of India, Australia, Japan and the USA, but in this case it could not be called exclusively an alliance of Asian democracies. In fact this alternative setting does not invalidate the concept behind it - whether there are three Asian countries (a triangle) plus the USA or four Asian states and the US in the role of the magister does not change the facts. Still, for the next parts of this analysis the Quadrilateral will be considered to be that of the Asian states, with back aid from American side, but without the US as a formal member.

The main question in this theoretical scenario is if it is feasible in real world or not, since the four states mentioned above are all too different in culture, economy and, most important, do not share the same political goals. On the other hand, a joint position would be beneficial for all, in the face of a greater danger, meaning to become a satellite state under the influence of Beijing.

The objectives are as follows: to highlight the pros and cons regarding this theory and to evaluate academically what the chances of success for this endeavour are. Since this is not an actual fact but a hypothetical one, all the arguments and all the logical implications must be considered keeping this aspect in mind. This is the foremost drawback of the study: the fact that all are just simple suppositions that could become reality, or not.

Other limitations derive from the main condition, as there are a multitude of hypotheses, arguments and counter-arguments that this paper cannot cover. Moreover, the entire analysis is envisaged only from the US point of view regarding this containment doctrine, but in reality it can be other way around too, and China can also make efforts to confine the United States on both its coasts, by rallying the Pacific states on one side of the US and the EU on the other side.

The present paper is addressed to anyone interested in geopolitics, especially on the struggle for dominance in the SE Asia theatre. Still for one to be able to understand all the connections and

implications of these intricate movements of all the state actors, a basic level of geopolitical knowledge is desirable.

Methodology

Considering the nature of this study, the methodology consists exclusively in a qualitative research of academic resources such as scientific articles, work papers, and various primary and secondary data sources. These issues are combined in an integrated logical argumentation with historical elements and facts that are relevant to the principles and doctrines referred to in this work.

The Containment Doctrine

After the Second World War, for a brief time, the world had only one real super-power, the United States of America (despite Stalin's army strength, USSR had no nuclear capabilities). But shortly after, the Soviets caught up in the atomic weaponry field as they developed their nuclear arsenal between 1942 and 1949; and by this the world turned into a genuine bipolar setting, both in military and ideological terms. At that moment US citizens did not want another devastating war with USSR, but at the same time US administration (under H. Truman) was determined to stop the advance of communist ideology in the less developed states from Asia, Africa and Central and South America. What was to do? One possible answer came in the form of the Containment Doctrine, a plan based on George Kennan's vision (Kennan, February, 1946) expressed in the famous 1947 X article (or Long Telegram). In this Kennan expressed a few hard but very concrete realities of that day: communism will be in a perpetual conflict with the capitalist world, the Soviet Union will assume the role of promoter for the socialist cause and, more important, since the two systems cannot co-exist peacefully, eventually the communist world and the capitalist one will be in open conflict. Many of these considerations emerged from the deep feeling of insecurity specific to Russian elites and not after "honest and objective appraisal of facts" (Kauppi, October 1994, p. 620).

In these conditions, the United States had to find a way to stop the red expansion; it was a matter of survival - if the Marxist-Leninist

ideology would engulf too much of the world, the Leftist side would become too powerful, and that would be a direct threat to America's interests and even to the US itself. Truth to be told, by the end of 1949, the communist side gained a strong overall momentum, marked by two important milestones: the USSR successfully tested a nuclear device (RDS-1) on the 29th of August and Mao proclaimed The People's Republic of China on the 1st of October, with China becoming the 2nd biggest communist state of the world. Since going to war with the other super-power and its strong allies was the least desirable option for the US and since the bilateral communication ways were less and less feasible, the plan was to halt its advance around the globe. It was an indirect diplomatic movement in the sense that the US sought to convince various nations not to rally behind the red flag. It was also a kind of compromise: what was done was done, and the US would attack neither the USSR and its back-yard states nor China, but would take action against any other attempts to spread communist ideology in other countries. In 1948 Kennan expressed that the Administration "should identify those areas of the world that were crucial to US security in the sense that they could not be permitted to fall into hostile hands" (Mayers, 1986, p. 147), meaning that the US should secure an overseas "ring of fire" for its own defence.

This grand strategy of containment was considered suited for the early days of the Cold War, but as years passed by it proved to be very costly. Therefore, in the '80s Stephen Walt proposed that containment could be refined into a derivate concept, one of "finite containment". There is a strong resemblance between these 2 theories, in the way that the US should continue to support Western Europe, South Korea, Japan and the oil states in the Middle East. But there is also one major difference: the anti-communist containment will be enforced only in certain regions, those specific areas that Kennan considered to be vital industrial centres, not in all Third World (Walt, 1989, p. 9-10) states. Somehow this can be seen as a selective restriction for communism, and was caused by the decline of the USSR in terms of economic and political capabilities to expand its ideology. Simply said, why should America invest resources in areas that did not represent a

key point for its strategy? In the end it is but a calculus of minimizing effort and simultaneously maximizing effects.

It is important to emphasize that Kennan's geopolitical idea was built along the same line with Nicholas J. Spykman's theory of *Rimland*, a thesis regarding the true importance of an area, based on geographical factors and geostrategic considerations, and applied to the Eurasia. He argued that the Rimland of Eurasia - consisting of the outer zones (or the "marginal crescent") of the continent, encompassing the regions located (on global scale) near the main bodies of water - was in fact of much more strategic importance than the Heartland, represented by the immense Siberian fields and plateaus. So, in his view, almost all Europe, Asia Minor, Middle East, India and Indochina, mainland China as well as Russian extreme orient was the zones of development due to the advantages of resources, population as well as cheap waterways for transport existing in proximity.

If we consider it, the theory holds water and can be extrapolated to other continents as well - North America has its East and West coast as main areas of development (plus the Great Lakes area), Africa has Maghreb & Mashriq in the North, South Africa in the southern tip and the Gulf of Guinea in the middle, South America and Australia have their East Coast much more developed than the middle of continent. So in a way the entire human culture is somehow contained by geography as well. In his theory Spykman also referred to the fact that the balance of power in Europe and Asia would automatically impact US security because, if only one political entity (or even a state ideology common to all countries) controlled all the aggregate resources of the Eurasian landmass, then such a concentration of power would cancel any advantage that the US had (Walt, 1989, p. 13).

Kennan's vision and concrete proposals were not altogether accepted by all the analysts of those days. Walter Lippmann, for example, underlined that it was faulty and couldn't be well implemented. Moreover, any attempt to do so would be a failure for America's internal morale and external prestige. In his opinion, this doctrine had a problem with prioritizing actions and in distinguishing vital economic and political interests (like Europe) from peripheral ones (naming Asia). Not to mention the costs involved for US military to

be able to cover all parts of the world where communist threats might have appeared. Lippmann also dismissed the importance of ideology in USSR, and stated that direct realist interests like self-defence and balance of power were the main determinants of Moscow's policy (Mayers, 1986, p. 137).

In practical terms, this Containment strategy was materialized in various movements made by the US, both on political and economic sectors. Firstly, the USA sustained rebuilding Western Europe, with the help of the well-known Marshall Plan. It was a necessary action for two main reasons: 1. capitalist Europe would be an extremely important ally in an eventual conflict with the Russians since it could serve as a buffer zone and a battleground outside American soil, and 2. because the war industry was reverting to civil production and Europe would prove to be a very profitable customer for American products. Secondly, there were the armed conflicts in which the US took part directly against local communist forces heavily assisted logistically and technologically by USSR and China: Korea and Vietnam, plus the non-official involvement in Afghanistan. Thirdly, although officially it is not part of containment doctrine, the US managed to reduce the Marxist-socialist threat in Latin America by backing some nationalist governments and leaders, even if these persons showed serious dictatorial inclinations.

On a cold-minded scrutiny this containment strategy worked only partially. Because the communism system did not engulf the entire world in the fifties and sixties, it can be seen as a success, but in fact it is a rather moderate one. The costs were indeed very high for the US and the western world; the armed conflicts were stalemates (see Korea) or defeats (case of Vietnam), the spheres of influence remained relatively constant, especially in Europe, and neither side could get the ascendancy over the other. In the end, the USSR collapsed mostly because of internal system failures and economic shortages. It is true that in a minor way maybe the containment helped USSR disintegrate, but it was by no means the principal factor. Still, the idea in itself had some potential, if the implementation had been conducted with much more diligence from the US policy makers.

Current and future geopolitical conjuncture

The last period of the last 20-30 years big scale geopolitics was marked by the United States' world hegemony in conjunction with the rise of the "eastern dragon". Nowadays, the reality is that China is a global superpower both politically and economically. Maybe the country isn't yet fully developed in terms of internal infrastructure, social wellbeing and military strength, equipment and, even if it does not equal the powerful US Army & Navy yet, it is, nonetheless, comparable. In terms of dominance, China is now in the middle of the phase of acquiring allies and gaining footholds around the world. The Chinese are not as powerful as they present themselves or as they would like to be, but are much stronger than other geopolitical players would desire. So the actual geopolitical environment presents a dominant power that is showing some signs of slow decline, especially due to internal social, economic and political shortcomings and a rising (red) star that benefited greatly from the economic boost determined by globalization in combination with a savage exploitation of its main natural resource: very cheap human labour.

This course of action can lead to competition or cooperation, in theory. But in reality, it is most likely to generate a fierce competition, prolonged for a significant period of time, maybe even decades. It is no secret that China is engaging on a path for more self-sustained development on internal level and is assuming "a key role in the creation of a new international architecture challenging American global leadership" (Santino and Regilme, 2018, p. 10). This being said, there is a serious risk that at some point the two great powers will find themselves in an open conflict, if they cannot avoid Thucydides Trap. The clouds of a Sino-American war (that may very well be the Third World War if we consider that both are major nuclear powers) are in the headlines for some years now (Allison, 2015), and under Trump's Administration things went from bad to worse. Despite the fact that this geopolitical metaphor is overused and it is presented as an inevitable fatality, it should be noted that it is not absolutely necessary to have a war, even if the probability is quite high. Thucydides Trap has serious flaws. First of all, it presumes that a country can chose to develop up to the point where it would either enter a conflict with the existing

hegemonic power or remain at a lower level not to upset the leader. False, no country in the world would voluntarily stop its evolution into a great power out of fear, even if this means war. Secondly, the theory proved wrong in the Cold War era, so it can be wrong again. Still let us assume that, at one moment in time, there will be a war between these 2 states. Obvious one will win, but it will be a disaster, a Pyrrhic victory because of the casualties and material destruction. Who would benefit? Any other pretender to the world leader's seat and the main candidates are the EU and Russia, but this list is not exclusive. In fact, a war between China and the United States is the least desirable option for both of them as long as neither has an absolute upper hand.

Anyway, since we are still in the field of theories and suppositions, in this particular matter of whether the Trap can be avoided or not, the debate is still ongoing. There are multiple points of view, all fairly plausible and logical in essence. In the (ultra) neorealist rhetoric, the war between two great powers is not analysed in terms of "if", but "when". Indeed, if states were to judge all aspects of geopolitics independently (as not in a bigger picture) and only by the realist principles, then each of these actions would slowly drive the big powers to war. Metaphorically, it can be seen as a maelstrom gradually attracting the players into war, and each action would just get them one step closer. For example in J. Mearsheimer's offensive realist theory it is stated that the anarchic nature of the international system drives states to adopt an aggressive stance in order to secure an advantage, and by this a violent clash is more like to occur. State safety issue is perceived as a simple (and over-simplistic) equation of political, military and economic strength: maximize power to ensure a solid security (Johnson, Phil, and Thayer, 2016, p. 3). Regarding the explicit case of China and competition for power in SE Asian theatre, Mearsheimer asserts that the rise of this pretender is a capital security threat for the US, "with considerable potential for war", since "China cannot rise peacefully" (Mearsheimer, 2010, p. 382). Still, in some of his previous works (Mearsheimer, 1983), Mearsheimer admits that conventional deterrence is indeed a useful instrument in convincing an enemy not to undergo certain actions. The US used this type of action against USSR in the Cold War era, in addition to the nuclear stalemate, and, in the end,

proved to be quite fruitful. Even the author admits that “prospects for conventional deterrence in some future crisis are quite good” (Mearsheimer, 1983, p. 212), and what else this quadrilateral (or triangle) of Asian powers would be, if not a form of discouragement for Chinese ambitions. So, even if from the realist point of view the Trap seems virtually unavoidable in the long term, there are still some possibilities (yet in compliance to the realist principles) according to which the war can be postponed indefinitely, and therefore, *de facto* avoided.

In contrast to neorealist views, J. Nye brings a different perspective regarding Thucydides’ Trap. He states that the rise of a new great power in itself isn’t the actual trigger for war, but the fear (of losing hegemony) induced by the unfolding events in the other side (Nye, 2006, p. 74). It is a paradox: fear of conflict ignites the flame of war, by determining one side to start mobilizing and making preparations, a sign that the other side perceives as a threat and starts its own military development programs. In the end, this arming spiral and ever-growing tension require just a spark to unleash a full-scale bloodshed. As such, one logical conclusion is that if the fear factor is removed, the pitfalls of realist geopolitics can be avoided, or at least their unfavourable effects can be diminished. Nye argues that there is no need for war between the great powers; if both China and the United States understand that cooperation is mutually beneficial for both and adopt a peaceful position one towards the other. Regarding the confinement theory applied to China, Nye dismisses it and underlines that China must be integrated in the geopolitical landscape (Nye, 2013). Containment and armed deterrence are elements of a long gone era, and are not suited for 21st Century politics. China cannot be so easily fenced and one strong argument is that in the Cold War Era there were almost no economic relations between the US and USSR; the situation is totally different now, as China is strongly integrated in the global trade flow.

These opinions can be seen as the two extremes of an imaginary spectrum of viewpoints. One states that war is inevitable and the other one argues that war can be prevented and peace can be maintained. But there are some middle-positioned theories as well. For instance, S. Walt states that the US has many incentives to remain

an active player in Asia and to make “it harder (though, of course, not impossible) for China to project power elsewhere in the world (including areas closer to the United States itself)” (Walt, 2020). But unfortunately the result would be a null-sum outcome, meaning that one side wins and one side loses (Walt, n.d). For the winning side it is good, although for the entire global political and economic environment these circumstances are not the best, and that is why both a live war and a cold war should be prevented. In the same range of perspectives we can place the idea expressed by Y. Yuan in what he names “The Churchill Trap” (Yuan, 2018, p. 200) (as opposed to Thucydides’ trap), meaning another long cold war between China and the US that would not be beneficial to anyone.

In conclusion, at this moment, there are more theories regarding the future geopolitical landscape and each has its own fair arguments. Some variants sustain that we are going towards a bi-polar world China versus the USA, which will lead to conflict. Other opinions are more in favour of a multi-polar world, with three or four actors. This setting would be much stable in terms of war because it would make much more use of the principles of the balance of power. An arena with multiple players would imply more 3-way or 4-way petty frictions, but would reduce greatly the peril of a catastrophic nuclear conflict. For example, D. Acemoglu express that a bipolar world may be more unstable than a quadri-polar one because it “would heighten the risk of violent conflict” (Acemoglu, 2020).

At this moment nothing is clear and all these suppositions could became reality. But, on a deeper analysis, in the long term, the bi-polar scenario has more chances to come true. Even if in the near future the world will be multi-polar, in time only 2 sides will be outlined. It is the natural phenomenon of polar attraction that will create these factions, each one composed of one alpha and multiple acolytes. Of course, there will still be countries that will stay out of the game, like there were in the Cold War era, but these will not act as a factor for balancing power or as an arbiter, but rather as passive spectators.

To be fair it must be remembered that on a theoretical level there is another alternative, a non-polar world, be it in a form of complete anarchy or as a much deeper globalized world, in which there

are no great powers and no underdogs. This means that most of the states are equally comparable in power; there is neither hegemony nor desire for dominance. This is less likely to be feasible because even in anarchy there will be entities that will want to rise. On the other hand, it is even less probable that all the states have a quite equal level of might and influence.

Analysing all these possibilities, the one with two-world giants seems not only to be plausible but also to have the best odds to occur. Therefore, for further analysis in this paper we will consider this scenario, even if it is not a certainty. This examination is not invalidated if America has a democratic or republican president. Either way China will be a competitor for the United States on all accounts. What is true is that the relation between Beijing and Washington can be more open or, on the contrary, more distant, according to the US external politics and vision. At one moment in Trump's mandate it seemed like confrontation was almost inevitable (Rachman, 2020). Fortunately there were no military clashes. With the beginning of the third decade of the century and with democrats back in power it is possible to witness a milder tone in White House rhetoric, but this does not mean that the USA is not keeping a close eye on its challenger's movements and that it will not try to undermine any form of regional Chinese expansion into SE Asia. Most likely there will be a "chill war", if not a Cold War in all its meanings. Practically the fact that Democrats or Republicans are in power in one instance or another has only a marginal impact on the competitive phenomenon between these giants.

The Containment Doctrine adapted to modern times

There is a well-known saying that history repeats itself. Not entirely true, but not completely false either. History never repeats the details because circumstances are never the same, but, in the big picture, some situations in the present are, in some ways, similar to ones from the past. Nowadays we are facing a possible Cold War, waged once again between communists and capitalists, both sides in possession of nuclear powers. Still, there are a lot of differences: China's communism is an original one, closer to capitalism than to pure Leninist thesis, the economy is globally connected and integrated, Beijing has

substantially more financial resources due the fact that China is one of the top industrial manufacturers, the world is not (yet) strongly divided and there are multiple players in the arena. This being said and considering that actual war is the least desirable action, the US could try to resurrect the old containment doctrine and to adapt it to modern times.

The essence of the plan remains the same: politically and economically encircle China and keep it at bay, in its own territories. What changes is that, hopefully, there will be no fighting between satellite states and the Chinese army, although the situation in Taiwan could escalate to an open conflict any day. How can this be put to work remains to be seen, but one plausible alternative is to create a zone in Asia that opposes Chinese influence. This initiative is purely speculative at this moment, as no serious actions have been taken so far. Everything is still in the phase of theoretical discussion of what influence levers could be pulled. The fact is that both sides could do the same thing and try to attract smaller countries in their slipstream. On the US side, the scheme is to capacitate 4 big countries in the area to form a sort of an informal alliance directed against Beijing hegemony. The notion of “big” represents in fact the extent of importance, and it can be translated at the same time by economic power or geographical features. In this sight the 4 countries will be Japan - because of its economic and technological power, South Korea - for the same reasons, Australia - for its resources and massive landmass and India because of its greatness in area and population and also because of its nuclear capabilities.

The metaphoric name of this theoretical construct was chosen to be the “Quadrilateral of Democracies” (Madan, 2017), or the Quad/Squad in its compressed title. The idea is not particularly new; it was postulated in different forms, only that it did not have a geopolitical dimension in the beginning. First attempts of a stronger collaboration were made after the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean. Afterwards, different attempts to form a greater alliance between the maritime powers in Asia (except China) occurred, but all ended up indecisively. At that time China was indeed seen as a threat, but not at the scale that is today, so each time some of the members backed off from the initiative. But the actual situation is quite distinct. Xi's regime showed

very clearly (even if never admitted officially) that China aims to be the true master of Asia. It is logical that Xi's China would not want an open war with the US and its allies and would gladly avoid the aforementioned Trap of Thucydides, as long as their strategy of expansion continues. The tasks of constructing artificial islands with anti-ship missiles outside territorial waters, building military bases in Countries like Cambodia and Djibouti, the increasing pressure put by Beijing on Taiwan and the growing presence in Central Asia and even Africa bare witness of China's actual intentions. Against this setting, there were attempts to invigorate the Quad a few years ago, but nothing concrete was achieved and success is still elusive. Maybe when the situation escalates to the boiling point, the wheels will be put in motion and a mutual understanding (official or not) will be in force.

For the states concerned, this alliance would help them remain largely independent of Beijing's will. Each one taken independently is no match for China: Japan, despite its technology, has no army, has no land to expand, population is ageing and economy has been stagnating for many years; South Korea is small and even if it is a high-tech country, it cannot withstand alone; Australia has the land but is mostly a desert, has very little population and is dependent on China for exports of raw materials. And, last but not least, India has the population and some military strength, but the economy is low compared to the Chinese one. Each one in part cannot challenge the dominant power, but all 4 combined would gather enough strong points to counter-balance Chinese vigour and, with United States' support, to bring stability to the Asian theatre in matters of influence and power.

For Washington, this agreement would act like the barrier the US put on USSR in South - Central Europe and Turkey back in the Cold War era. Like then, it would represent a line of defence in case of need far away from US land but very close to Chinese mainland. What else to ask more than an encirclement of the foe in his own proximity and using someone else to do the job.

For the moment the battle is carried out at the level of influence and its main peace-time instrument to achieve these goals is the economy. Multiple countries in Asia are, to some extent, dependent on Chinese economy, and, in addition, their initiative of The Belt and Road

(former One Belt, One Road) promised a lot of benefits to some of these less developed nations. How to counter this? Only by rallying some powerful economies and bringing them together so that they can oppose the Chinese economic takeover, both in their own turf as well as in other smaller countries from this region. The economic sphere is the first battlefield of this clash. In general, what this confinement strategy should do is to monitor and thwart any initiative that targets a vital point or sector. Where Chinese controlled firms move to secure an asset or take a strong point in form of resources or strategic infrastructure like ports, airports, railways or telecommunications and power grids, there should be a counteroffer or a counter move that would compete with the Chinese. Much like in the 5G affair, but extended to multiple domains. Obviously, not all propositions would be accepted by the host countries and some would indeed get into business with Chinese partners, but at least some could be diverted.

At the commercial level, the dependency on PRC's home market on both its flows – in and out – should be reduced as much as possible. Take for example Australia that is predominantly dependent on the contracts with Chinese manufacturers (but, in fact, with Beijing government because everything is state controlled in China) for raw materials. At the moment, there is little alternative for these goods to be sold elsewhere, mainly because transporting them on a longer route means extra money to be paid, and, therefore, less competition. Furthermore, the forecasts show an even greater increase in trade between these two lands as Chinese economy is expected to keep growing by 2030 (Laurenceson and Zhou, 2019, p. 7). Economically speaking, it may be good for Australia, but politically it is not so great. In fact “the rapid growth of China’s economic influence and presence has actually fuelled rather than allayed deep-seated, visceral concerns about Australia’s long-term security” (Beeson and Wang, June 2014, p. 580). Even in the case of ASEAN, things are not much better. These states seek to continue their expansion on the Chinese domestic market to sell their products. Indeed, “the growth of the Chinese economy necessarily means it has also become a globally significant buyer of exports from other countries” (Park, November 2007, p. 486). All these spell in fact deep dependency on China's preferences, and its political

leaders know all too well how to exploit this. Unfortunately, at the moment there isn't much to do; geography dictates the profitability: China is near, the USA and the EU are far away.

Things may change significantly if some kind of arrangement is made in economic sectors, even if driven by political motivation. It could prove effective even though it not so economically orthodox and in line with libertarian theorists that advocate *laissez-faire* and non-involvement of the state in economic affairs. Maybe Australia will not be solely dependent on China any more, Japan will find a greater market for its products and also India's average standards of life could improve.

The second sphere of confrontation is the state security one. At this moment China is on the move to acquire momentum and influence by intimidation and force. It does so because there is little coherent opposition, or where it is mainly declarative or in a form of a few joint military and naval applications. In this matter Beijing has both main advantages: it has the manpower and the technology to equip the army. None of the other states in Asia (except maybe the Russian Federation) can match PRC's army. Only if the 4 democracies form this sort of alliance that some called it "an Asian NATO" (Mehra, August 2020, p. 10) could they hope to deter China's plan and to hold the line together. In this case the US aid is mandatory, both tactically and politically. For example, Shinzo Abe proposed a new Grand Strategy that would allow Japan to exit the passive state and become a greater military force at global scale, in the idea of maintaining peace but also self-security (Akimoto, 2018, p. 181-183), but this move implies first adopting an Amendment to the Constitution that the US enforced on Japan in 1947, and that clearly states in Article 9 that Japan should not develop offensive armies, heavy weaponry, medium and long range missiles, potent war fleets with fleet carriers or non-conventional weapons. All military features that Japan may possess are for self-defence of its islands. Truth to be told under this disguise of self-defence force Japan is already planning some multi-purpose warships that can be used as attack helicopter carriers. But even so, the difference compared to PLA is enormous. The only way Asian states can counter China in terms of military might is by working together at local level and in a strong cooperation with the USA at a global scale. At a regional scale, Abe's

proposal is another form of a possible Quadrilateral, under the name of Democratic Security Diamond, in fact this being another initiative to draw the US further into defending Asian nations against Chinese ambitions. Abe even expressed that “together they needed to prevent the South China Sea from becoming a Lake Beijing” (Lee, 2016, p. 2).

The third and most comprehensive field of action is the political one. It is the most important because, in the end, both macro-economic and security branches depend on policy-makers. In fact, this is the first level where consensus must be obtained between the Asian powerful democracies. The US diplomacy will have a significant role in achieving this goal. It is clear that the partnership is mutually beneficial both for the US and the Quadrilateral on general terms, but between members would presume some small concessions, be it in terms of economic grants and commercial agreements or in terms of military coordination and dependencies. But political abilities are required to solve yet another old time problem - the historical dimension and rivalries. It is well known that between the Asian nations there were past conflicts and resentments are still deeply rooted in the collective mind. If politics and politicians can solve these setbacks and bring together all big democratic states in this region to form a coherent agreement set for medium and long term, then there is a chance that this power node could reduce China's influence and make Beijing think twice before venturing into their neighbours' borders via land and sea. Even more, if this Quadrilateral is to be successful it can attract more members, even if they are not military powerful. China is practically synonymous with strength in numbers and one (maybe only one) way to stop its grip is strength in numbers. This scenario happened before, with NATO, a mutual defence organization that became the greatest security provider for its members and that gradually expanded to the point that now encompasses 30 countries and it is present on almost all continents. Although this common agreement is not supposed to be a “NATO in Asia”, it could borrow some of the traits and principles.

The good, the bad and the unexpected

The pros of this presumptive alliance for the Asian countries were already presented in the above chapter. Simply put, the main

benefit for the countries involved is that they would have a better chance to resist Chinese sway, both economically and politically. At the same time, the benefits would also be for the USA, and these are accounted at multiple points. As already presented, this Quad, regardless of its judicial form, would function as a first barrier of defence for the USA in case of real armed conflict between the super-powers. It is true that the modern warfare presumes using intercontinental missiles, submarines, cyber-war or weapons deployed in space (although using space-based WMD is illegal according to Article IV of the Outer Space Treaty,¹ in case of world war these treaties would be irrelevant), but in reality having a geo-political blockade around China is a great asset for the US. In the end, in case of conflict, these countries would be the best forward bases for military operations. On the other hand, if PRC decides to invade one or more of these countries, it would give the rest and the USA time to prepare a counter-offensive. So, at the tactical level, a “half ring” of US allies around mainland China would help either way the United States to respond better to any attack. Still, this scenario is the least plausible, since it would be the worst decision for both countries as mutual destruction does not help any of them.

On a lower intensity level, in case of a Cold War without military actions, the simple existence of the Quadrilateral would keep China busy in its own adjacency, and thus, at least in theory, it could reduce its bold movements of engrossment important strategic points around the globe, especially in Africa, Middle East or even Europe. Furthermore, such a security agreement between 4 of the main states in Asia could represent a catalyst for an even greater concordance. It is fair to note that, in SE Asia, ASEAN already exists, an official organization for cooperation in economic, cultural, technological, and educational field that comports a mutual security dimension as well. Still ASEAN’s main purpose is mostly economic and, at a military level, the achievements are not spectacular. Besides, no state of those 4 that would compose the

¹ “Treaty on Principles Governing the Activities of States in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space, including the Moon and Other Celestial Bodies”, United Nations, Office for Outer Space Affairs, December 19, 1966, <https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/spacelaw/treaties/outerspacetreaty.html>, [accessed January 26, 2021].

Quadrilateral is member in ASEAN, so from this point of view there is no direct interconnection. Nevertheless, if the Quad proves to be fruitful in its mission, there could be closer relations between these 2 groups in the long run.

There are also some not-so-great aspects about the proposed Quadrilateral, some of them representing really strong counter-arguments. Firstly, at a military level, any initiative of this kind could stir the waters and create serious turmoil in Beijing. Any form of grouping, "however benignly calibrated would be viewed as creating rather than countering the conditions for an escalating regional security dilemma" (Lee, 2016, p. 32). China would perceive this as a serious threat and would deem justified to take immediate actions. In a way, what was supposed to reduce Chinese appetite for military offensive and conquest in modern terms, could very well initiate a conflict in the area, conflict that would inevitably attract the United States and maybe other big powers from Europe. This is the other side of the coin, and as it was already shown war is not desirable. So, if this Quadrilateral is to be operationalized, it must not cross certain boundaries that would trigger a furious response; at the same time, it has to be bold enough to meet its purpose. This aspect is yet another problem because if the initiative is too modest and only declarative, nothing important will be achieved. It is impossible to tell what those limits are; it depends on the abilities of the politicians and diplomats and the particular conjuncture of the moment. Another downside of the proposal could be represented by the internal strife between the members. In any hypostasis the situation in the region will be tense, both between China and the presumable Quad countries and within the group as well. The shade of confrontation makes everyone uneasy. Such dissensions can alter severely the effectiveness of the endeavour and the entire construct may be short lived. In addition, Chinese diplomacy will not stay aside, and like every great power, they know the principle "divide et impera". This is a systemic vulnerability of any organization, and since the participation is voluntary, in any moment one or more governments can choose to back off from this deal. If this event occurs, the whole build and containment strategy becomes obsolete.

And, of course, there is the unexpected factor. This entire argument of the Quadrilateral of Democracies and the new containment measures against China are based on hypotheses, not on concrete facts. Likewise, it is founded on the premise that those four countries do want to make this agreement for their own interest. However, in reality, this premise can be very well invalidated from start, or even sometimes after the formation of the coalition. Some of the states included in this list may not want to risk their relation with China, even if it is a de-balanced one. Often, the economic factors on short terms are more important over a presumable vision extended over a longer period. Other unforeseen turns of events may be even more spectacular. For example, India, which is also member in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (since 2017), an organization that was designed to be a counterweight to NATO by putting at the same table Russia and China, could lean towards this security framework if the auspices are favourable. So far SCO promised much but achieved little in terms of geopolitical influence, but in the long term things may change. At this moment, we can argue that India joined SCO firstly because its arch-rival Pakistan also joined, and secondly to keep close on China. In the intricate geopolitical environment it is recommended to keep your competitors under watch, and India is doing just that, being both a contender and an associate to China. So, the whole plan may backfire at the USA if this alliance (or some members) of Asian democracies at one point consider that the Chinese side is more profitable and instead of being a tool for containment against Beijing expansion, transforms into a real barrier for US interests in South-Eastern Asia. In presumptive geopolitics everything is possible and all is permitted.

Conclusions

The paper aimed to bring forward a possible geopolitical scenario of the years to come. This future US containment strategy is just a small piece in the giant puzzle of international relations at global scale. In the new millennium the battles between states and military blocks may not be conducted in the classical way. In fact, expanding Kennan's idea, the political and economic warfare could represent just another logical instance of Clausewitz's concept of war, in the absence

of a real armed conflict (Kennan, 1948). Still, the fact that China and the USA will be on an even greater competition for influence and power is almost a certainty. How this dispute will unfold is impossible to predict. One possibility is that the world will once again find its equilibrium in a bi-polar frame. If this is to be the case, than both China and the United States will try to gather strong allies and have under their influence as many countries and strategic assets as possible. Simultaneously, each one will make continuous efforts to destabilize the other side. Open war is a possibility, but it would weaken both countries for a long time, and, therefore, is undesirable as long as either of the two blocks does not have a decisive advantage. But there are other possibilities to hinder an opponent's movements.

One of these schemes presumes using the containment instruments in order to block any expansion beyond that which already exists. In a way, it is a kind of *status quo* imposed by one side on the enlargement of its opposite's dominion. So, the main idea for the US is to enforce a containment strategy on China's regional pre-eminence by using local allies. To some extent, it would be similar in principle with the one used during the Cold War, but with notable adaptation to the determinants of the day. And who else could be better candidates as allies than those states in Asia that are democracies - in order to have a common ideological root with the US and to be trustworthy, and at the same time those nations that somehow feel threatened by the rise of China. In this light, the plan to build an alliance of democracies (be it three or four founding members) seems worthwhile on paper. But there is a long way from thought to fact. The attempt in itself is not without chances of success, but for this to work it would require a very strong political will, both from the designed Quad countries and from the United States. Undoubtedly, there are virtual benefits for all parties involved. The Asian nations could better fend off Chinese claims both in economic and in regional security fields and this would also boost cooperation between them. For the US it would be a barrier against eventual Chinese grasp on the entire SE Asia and Pacific Area - act that would seriously affect US interests, and at the same time it would represent a strong moral ascendant over the main competitor.

The entire venture is dependent on cohesion, mutual trust and of course US backing. Without US support chances of success are slim at best, mainly because none of the Asian countries can challenge the Chinese by themselves, and not even together these states cannot match Beijing's economic and military power. That is why this whole construct is dependent on US involvement, directly or indirectly. But there is also the other part of the tale, meaning that these countries can, at one point, become China's allies against the US. It not likely, but it is not logically impossible, especially if the Chinese offer better deals and pecuniary incentives. In the end, for the US and its possible plan to encircle China, it is all about offer and counteroffer.

The importance of this analysis resides in the fact that whatever will happen, the effects of this action would not be limited only to the East Asia. Any friction between the two superpowers would directly impact the whole world. The entire global economy will suffer dire consequences in forms of shortages for common goods and fall on investment yields from an armed conflict or an economic and diplomatic Cold War between the US and China.

Unquestionably the study has its limits since it cannot cover all the aspects and cannot investigate deeper each of these directions. One possible development would require examining other ways to confine China, not just in SE Asia, but also in the opposite part, towards Siberia and Central Asia. Similarly, other points of view are needed to expand this groundwork, especially since Chinese government may try to do a similar movement in agreement with the EU and/or the Russian Federation in order to pinch the US on both its maritime flanks.

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