

In February 1946 the State Department, at the request of the Treasury Department, asked the US Embassy in Moscow to explain the 'incomprehensible Soviet unwillingness' to adhere to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Ambassador Averell Harriman already had left and the Deputy Chief of Mission, George Kennan, replied with the longest telegram in history, some 19 pages. A single brief message would, he felt, be a dangerous degree of over-simplification. Kennan had already tendered his resignation in frustration over much incomprehension in Washington, but had to wait till the new ambassador would arrive. The telegram gave him as No. 2 the unusual opportunity to summarise his experience of two postings in Moscow. He used it to explain the background and main features of the Soviet post-war outlook and their projection not only on official policy but also on policy implemented through 'front' organisations and stooges of all sorts. Willem van Eeklen revisits it as an object lesson for the 21st century.

The telegram made Kennan famous for his advocacy of a containment policy which would primarily focus on political and economic issues, and much less on military aspects. The telegram itself remained classified for a long time, but in a 1947 Foreign Affairs article under the title "The Sources of Soviet Conduct", signed as Mr. X, Kennan was able to make his views public, albeit anonymously. His argument was that long-term peace between the capitalist West and communist Russia was impossible, owing to the mixture of traditional Russian neurotic insecurity, Stalin's need for an external enemy and a Soviet version of Russian messianism. Russia would seek the collapse of capitalism not by armed attack, but by a mixture of bullying and subversion, making use of communist sympathizers in the West. The correct response would be a long-term containment of Soviet aggressive tendencies through the "adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points", which would induce a 'gradual mellowing' of Stalin's system. The Soviet system had to evolve or it would collapse. The Us did not have to defeat the Soviet Union. Only to outlast it and measure up to its own best traditions, worthy of preservation as a great nation.

Later, as director of State's policy planning think-tank and thereafter, Kennan came to regret the use of the word 'counterforce' and vehemently denied having intended any military dimension of containment. Counterforce yes, but in the form of diplomacy and covert action keeping short of war. He applied this concept as one of the intellectual architects of the Marshall Plan which helped Western Europe to rebuild and keep its democratic vigour against communist expansion.. Unfortunately, in other fields Kennan's ideas seldom were fully consistent. His strength laid in analysis, not in the implementation of policy. In September 1946 within the inner circles of government he even suggested a preventive nuclear war to deter feared Soviet aggression. He also pushed for clandestine sabotage operations against the Soviets and armed support for anti-communist movements, which seemed to be more consistent with the 'roll-back' policy he opposed than with containment. Niall Ferguson's book about Kissinger mentions the Kennan proposal to postpone the Italian elections for fear of a communist win. At the other end of the debate he objected to the formation of NATO, at least as a military alliance, the re-arming of West Germany and the building of a nuclear arsenal. In April 1947 he claimed that ten good atomic hits would be enough to wipe out Soviet industry, so more nuclear weapons should not be a priority. Other means were necessary to prevent Moscow from scoring many geopolitical victories.

In 1950 the strategic picture worsened in Asia and Dean Acheson, first regarded as the mentor of Kennan, scrambled to add a military dimension to containment, declaring a defence perimeter to defend Japan, Okinawa and the Philippines (but not including South Korea). Kennan was thought to be too-subtle and was replaced by Paul Nitze. NSC

document 68 proposed a rapid build-up of political, economic and military strength of the free world.

In Kissinger's analysis, US strategy on the Soviet Union began with containment, which already under Truman drew the country into peripheral actions. Eisenhower adopted the alternative of excessive reliance on the threat of all-out nuclear war ♦ massive retaliation ♦ as financially the best affordable. A combination with strengthening conventional forces and fighting a war in Korea would be unsustainable. Yet, his strategy was not as monolithic as it might have seemed. The revamped National Security Council drafted an approach with seven pillars: preventing a nuclear holocaust, the feasibility of deterrence, the necessity of a secure 'second strike' capability, the abandonment of a forcible 'roll-back' of the Soviet empire as a US goal, the recognition of the long-term character of the Cold War, the strengthening of US alliances in Europe and Asia, and the pursuit of realistic forms of arms control. The means to these ends would extend far beyond the Strategic Air Command and would embrace diplomacy, psychological warfare and covert operations.

As a diplomat Kennan was not a great success. His worst moment came in 1952 when, as ambassador to the Soviet Union, he allowed himself on a trip to Berlin to compare his life in Moscow with his days in Hitler's Germany. Stalin declared him persona non grata ending his ambassadorship after five months. In 1961-63 he served as ambassador to Yugoslavia and resigned soon after Tito had taken a neutral position on the Soviet threat to West Berlin.

Kennan was an example of the brilliant strategist, who nevertheless got caught by the fact that sometimes truth is stronger than fiction. His understanding of history, continuity and culture remained precious, but (fortunately) could not entirely predict the course of events. Kennan felt that German rearmament within NATO would make a European solution forever impossible. And he was not the only one. Yet, he also foresaw the collapse of the Soviet Union, which finally happened in 1992 and ♦ thanks to Gorbachev - fundamentally changed the entire situation in Europe. In 2014 Farid Zakaria headed his review of The Kennan Diaries with 'The poetic, impractical conservatism of a Cold War Strategist. To him Kennan's genius was to perceive accurately the essence of other countries and to connect them to their past, but failed to understand the forces of modernity and in his own land remained a bewildered guest, fearing danger and disaster.

Kennan was awarded the peace prize of the German book-fair in 1982 and he gave a speech on "Get to work for peace, now!" It came in the middle of the debate on nuclear disarmament, the zero-option for intermediate range ballistic missiles, a declaration of no-first use, or even total denuclearisation of Europe (which Kennan had favoured in his State Department days). His basic premise was that he did not see any East-West conflict important enough to warrant a conventional war, let alone a nuclear exchange . That might have been true in the eighties, but the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 came very close. Today positions have reversed with Putin (and the president of North Korea) bombastically talking about nuclear weapons. It looks like he has adopted the strategy of flexible response, while the US looks at a kind of equilibrium in nuclear weapons at the lowest possible level.

In terms of Russian strategy Kennan had a point in stressing their permanent desire for a security corridor along the borders. The enlargement of NATO might have increased the exaggerated Russian feeling of encirclement. He also was right in preferring political and economic methods over military strategy. That certainly makes more sense today when notions of Hybrid War show that only comprehensive approaches have a chance of being effective . Involvement should be the corollary of containment, but where will they touch each other ? And which actions by the West will have an impact on Russian behaviour? Clearly Russia aims at zones of influence around her borders, but Putin seems to have overlapped its

hands in the Ukraine and in the other frozen conflict. In the West few people trust him any more and there is unexpectedly large support for continuing economic sanctions, even if declining oil prices might be the largest cause of the Russian recession.

Professor Stephen Kotkin of Princeton University (where Kennan was a member of the Class of '25 and after his diplomatic stints a scholar in the Institute of Advanced Study and died in 2005, aged 101) expects that if Kennan would be alive today, he would advocate a policy of not overestimating the Russian menace or underestimating America's manifold advantages, building up US Alliances as a basis for negotiating from strength. As a rule Kennan sought the narrow path between showdown and conciliation, either of which could lead to unnecessary war, which leads Kotkin to exclaim: "Diplomacy never gets any easier !".

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