**The US is Running Out of Policy Options for China**

[Saad Masood](https://dailytimes.com.pk/writer/saad-masood/)

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“To fight a protracted war.” This is the literal translation of a four-character Chinese Chengyu idiom. It is thought to have been conceived by Sun Tzu, the great Chinese military strategist. In his era-defining book “The Art of War”, Sun Tzu says that “the supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting”. Chinese history is replete with examples where this expression has been applied with great effect! It was used by the Chinese Communist Party during the Long March where the party’s strategy of outlasting the Kuomintang through endurance and perseverance eventually paid off and the Communist Party emerged victorious in the Chinese Civil War. That was then and this is now. Have things changed? Not an iota! The Chinese gambit even today is to outlive its rival. Consider.

The reality today is that the US and China think of each other as the only counterweights in this global world. China with the ambition of global domination is looking to survive its rival. The US being the incumbent superpower is endeavouring to reduce and regulate its rivals growing influence. The recent past suggests that the US is struggling with its objective and thus may need to refine its policy options towards China.

US policy timeline for China reads like a toddler protecting its turf at the sight of a new entrant. Initially try to beat or browbeat the opponent into submission. Then attempt to use small talk to suss out the newcomer’s intentions. Subsequently aim to only give up a minor amount of territory. Lastly, endeavour to live at par if nothing else works.

In recent times, some policy czars have added another dimension to the US foreign policy towards China. That of Containment!

“Competition” was the one-word foreign policy approach that the US initially took towards China. The objective was to out-compete China in the three strategic segments of military, economy, and technology. The military strategy hinged on the build-up of American presence in all geographies especially in Asia-Pacific, modernisation of US armament muscle and selling more weapons to allies than China. The economic strategy was to increase share in different sectors including technology, manufacturing, and energy. The technology strategy focused on increased development spending, more intellectual patents and protection of product and services portfolio.

When the notion of competition didn’t arrest China’s dominance, the US Department of State included “Engagement” as another key tenet to dealing with China. The underlying strategy of this policy was three-fold – engage China through diplomacy, trade, and cultural exchanges – with the objective being China’s economic and political development but only to the extent that it became responsible albeit small stakeholder in the global system. The tactical manifestation of this strategy is showcased in at least three areas where the US and China are seemingly amicably cooperating. Counter-terrorism operations – as both have felt the blowback to their objectives from extremist elements operating relatively freely in a globalised world. Climate change – together they are the largest emitters of greenhouse gases and maybe have finally acknowledged it. This means that the US and China want to rectify the precarious climate situation and thus are strong proponents of the UN Climate Change COP initiative. Nuclear non-proliferation – being nuclear nations and realising the destruction that can be caused by these weapons, both are looking to limit the stockpiling of such armament along with stopping countries such as North Korea from reaching such a distinction!

In recent times, some policy czars – particularly the hawks in successive US administrations – have added another dimension to the US foreign policy towards China. That of “Containment”! The originators of this approach opine that the past two policies of competition and engagement with China have not returned the dividends expected and thus the US strategy needs to shift towards limiting China’s power, influence, and geographical reach.

Present circumstances suggest that even a confluence of these three approaches is neither sufficing nor fulfilling the foreign policy objectives of the US. This can only mean one thing – both toddlers must acknowledge each other’s presence and share the playground equally! It is high time that the US admits this reality by adding the policy of “Coexistence” to its contacts towards China. In the grey area of policy making, there is no reason that these approaches can’t exist simultaneously but it will be wise of the US to lead with coexistence rather than any of the other three!

Start with one Chinese idiom, and finish with another! When two tigers fight, one will be injured. Getting away from the literal translation, it suggests that because conflict can be costly it is best to coexist with your enemy even if it means making some compromises. Has this been done in the past? Of course, look at Cold War rivals, the US and the Soviet Union. Can it be done again? Of course, only if saner heads prevail!

*The writer is Director Programmes for an international ICT organization based in the UK and writes on corporate strategy, socio-economic and geopolitical issues*