

U.S. engagement with China a 'strategic blunder': Mearsheimer

Nixon's visit 50 years ago made sense but later American policy did not, scholar says

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WASHINGTON -- The U.S. "foolishly" pursued a policy of engagement with Beijing after the end of the Cold War, University of Chicago professor John Mearsheimer told Nikkei, arguing this policy misstep has contributed to China's economic and military rise.

Known as a realist in international relations theory, Mearsheimer asserted in his 2001 book, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, that the engagement approach taken by the U.S. would fail as an economically stronger China sought regional hegemony.

In his view, the U.S.'s belief that China would become a democracy as it grew in stature was a gross miscalculation. Not only the U.S., but Taiwan, Japan and South Korea all helped China become an economic giant, thus creating a geopolitical threat to themselves.

Mearsheimer differentiates this post-Cold War policy blunder from President Richard Nixon's engagement of Beijing, symbolized by his historic trip 50 years ago. Pursuing a quasi-alliance with China as a deterrent against the Soviet Union, he said, made strategic sense back then.

Edited excerpts of the interview follow.

Q: Looking back at the 50-year history between China and the U.S., do you think then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and President Nixon made the wrong decision?

A: No. I think you have to distinguish between American policy toward China during the Cold War -- the period of the late 1970s and the 1980s -- from the post-Cold War period from roughly 1990 up until 2017.

During the Cold War and under the policy of President Nixon, the U.S. decided to engage China and form a quasi-alliance with China against the Soviet Union.

That made eminently good sense. And Nixon was correct to help the Chinese economy grow, for the more powerful China became, the more effective it was as a deterrent partner against the Soviet Union. However, once the Cold War ended in 1989 and the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the U.S. no longer needed China to help contain the Soviet Union.

What we foolishly did was pursue a policy of engagement, which was explicitly designed to help China grow more powerful economically. Of course, as China grew economically, it translated that economic might into military might, and the U.S., as a consequence of this foolish policy of engagement, helped to create a peer competitor.

My bottom line is that the Nixon-Kissinger policy, from the early 1970s up until the late 1980s, made eminently good sense. But, after that, engagement was a colossal strategic blunder.

Q: After the Cold War ended, did the U.S. underestimate China's potential power to emerge as a great power?

A: I don't think that's correct. I think the U.S. thought China would become economically powerful, and indeed the U.S. wanted to help China become more prosperous.

The U.S. worked hard to integrate China into the world economy and into international institutions like the World Trade Organization.

The U.S. was not only expecting China to grow more powerful -- it was purposely helping China to grow more powerful. It was doing this based on the assumption that China would become a democracy over time and therefore would become a responsible stakeholder in an American-led international order.

Of course, that didn't happen. China did not become a democracy. And China, in effect, has set out to establish hegemony in Asia and challenge the U.S. around the planet. We now have a new Cold War.

Q: Why at that time did the U.S. think China would eventually become a democracy?

A: The U.S. felt that communism and fascism were no longer viable forms of government and that all states would eventually become liberal democracies, just like the U.S., just like Japan, and all we in the West had to do was speed up the process and help them become liberal democracies.

In the story that the Western elites told after the Cold War ended, both China and Russia were destined to become liberal democracies. This is all, I believe, clearly reflected in Francis Fukuyama's very famous article, "The End of History?" published in 1989.

The Fukuyama argument had enormous impact. His basic claim was that the world was becoming increasingly democratic, and as that happened, the world would become increasingly peaceful. When American elites helped China grow economically, they really did not think there was any chance China would become a peer competitor and a geopolitical threat to Japan or the U.S.

By the way, this was not a view that was limited to the U.S. If you went to Western Europe, if you went to Japan, if you went to Taiwan, this view was widespread.

Not only did the U.S. help China to grow economically, but Taiwan, of all countries, foolishly helped China to grow, as did Japan, as did South Korea, as did all the European countries. All of them were pursuing a remarkably foolish policy.

Q: It has been about 30 years since the end of the Cold War. Do you think a policy of containment policy could still work in handling China? Is it still effective today?

A: Well, it's very clear that, from roughly 1990 up until President Donald Trump entered the White House, that the U.S. pursued a policy of engagement which, as you know, was designed to make China wealthier.

Trump came into the White House and he basically abandoned engagement and said, "We're going to pursue a fundamentally different policy of containment."

President Biden has followed in Trump's footsteps. Like Trump, Biden is pursuing a containment policy. There's no question that the U.S. and Japan are bent on containing China. As to the question, 'can they contain China?' I think the answer is yes.

Q: How? A strategy of deliberately slowing China's economic growth is difficult to implement.

A: Containment has two dimensions, and we should first focus on the military dimension and then talk about the economic dimension.

In terms of the military dimension, it's quite clear that China is determined to upset the status quo in East Asia. China believes that it effectively "owns" the South China Sea. That's number one.

Number two is that China is determined to take Taiwan back and make it part of mainland China.

Number three, it's determined to control the East China Sea and take back what it calls the Diaoyu Islands, which the Japanese call the Senkaku Islands.

There's no question that China is a revisionist power, and the U.S. and its allies including Japan are determined to prevent it from taking over the South China Sea, from taking back Taiwan and from altering the status quo in the East China Sea.

Then there's the economic dimension of containment. There's no way at this point in time that the U.S. can roll back Chinese economic growth in any meaningful way. What the U.S. will try to do is limit that growth as much as possible and at the same time accelerate economic growth in the West.

When you look carefully at what the competition will look like, it will focus mainly on leading-edge technologies, like quantum computing, artificial intelligence, semiconductors, 5G and so on. That's where the real competition is going to take place.

Q: In the economic dimension, how can the U.S. and its allies slow China's growth without hurting themselves?

A: The question in these instances always becomes, "Who gets hurt more?" If you could do serious damage to the Chinese economy and only minimal damage to the American economy or the Japanese economy, you would pay that price.

Q: Is there a growing likelihood of the U.S. and China engaging in armed conflict?

A: For the foreseeable future, there's definitely going to be an intense security competition between China and the U.S. that looks a lot like the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Whether that turns into a hot war is another issue.

But I believe it is more likely to turn into a hot war than was the case with the first Cold War between Moscow and Washington.

The reason I worry more about war now is largely because of geography. The first Cold War was centered on Europe. The central front was the principal point of conflict between the U.S. and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies.

Deterrence in central Europe was very robust, and that was because the likelihood of war was remarkably low, because the cost would have been enormously high.

If you look at the present situation in East Asia, involving the U.S. and its allies against China, you can imagine limited wars over the South China Sea, over Taiwan, and over the East China Sea. The mere fact you can imagine a limited war, which is very different from the kind of

war we imagined on the central front during the first Cold War, means that today or tomorrow, you could have a war between the U.S. and China.

The fact that a U.S.-China war would be a limited war -- unlike the war on the central front - makes it more likely.

Q: What then is the likelihood of a limited war leading to a nuclear war? And is that more likely to happen now than it was during the Cold War?

A: Yes. Because of the geography, you could imagine the Chinese, if they were losing a fight over Taiwan, using a few nuclear weapons in the water. Or if the U.S. were losing a war with China over Taiwan, you could imagine it using a few nuclear weapons to rescue the situation.

I want to be clear here. I'm not saying that a nuclear war is likely, but I'm just saying it's much easier. I'm choosing my words carefully here. It's much easier to imagine nuclear weapons being used between the U.S. and China in a fight over the South China Sea, than it is in a fight over the central front, between the U.S. and its NATO allies, and the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies.

Q: Would the U.S. really be willing to fight China over an emergency in the Taiwan Strait?

A: I believe the U.S. is going to defend Taiwan if China attacks it. Period. I believe the American foreign policy elites who must make the decision will not care about public opinion. They will decide whether it makes good strategic sense for the U.S. to defend Taiwan.

We're not going to take a vote on whether or not to defend Taiwan if Taiwan is under threat. The leaders in the White House, State Department, and Pentagon will make that decision, and we will defend Taiwan for two reasons.

One is that it is enormously strategic. It's an important piece of real estate for the purposes of bottling up the Chinese naval and air forces inside the first island chain. It is imperative, as every Japanese strategist knows, that we control Taiwan and that we not allow Taiwan to fall into Beijing's hands. That's the first strategic reason we will fight and die for Taiwan.

The second reason is that if we, the U.S., were to abandon Taiwan, this would send a terrible message to every one of our allies in the region. Japan, for example, would no longer be able to rely on the American security umbrella, especially the nuclear umbrella.

Q: Chinese officials often say of the Taiwan situation that time is on their side.

A: They may be right. If China continues its impressive economic growth for the next 30 years and it grows at a more rapid pace than the U.S., it would be more powerful in 30 years than it is today.

From China's point of view, if you're thinking about conquering Taiwan, you're better off waiting till you grow much stronger, or until you grow much stronger relative to the U.S. than you are today.

The problem that the Chinese face is that it's very hard to know exactly what will happen with the Chinese economy over the next 30 years. And indeed, it's hard to know what will happen with the Japanese economy and the American economy.

Q: Back in 1993, you wrote that President Clinton was wrong in pressing Ukraine to become a non-nuclear state. Did you foresee the current problem Ukraine faces today?

A: Yes.

Q: Now Russia and China are cultivating a friendly relationship premised on the U.S. as their common enemy. Do you think Russia and China will be compatible in their stances toward Asia?

A: The U.S. has foolishly driven the Russians into the arms of the Chinese. I think Russia is the natural ally of the U.S. against China.

In 1969, the Soviet Union and China almost fought a war in Siberia. The Soviet Union and China -- and now we're talking about Russia and China -- have a history of bad relations, in large part because they share a border and each occupies big chunks of real estate in Asia. Russia should be an ally of the U.S. against China, and the U.S. needs all the allies it can get to contain China.

But what we have done by expanding NATO eastward is we have precipitated a huge crisis with Russia that prevents us from fully pivoting to Asia. We can't fully pivot to Asia because we're so concerned about events in Eastern Europe. That's the first consequence. The second is that we have driven the Russians into the arms of the Chinese. This makes no sense at all.

Q: The current tensions along the Ukraine border raise the question of whether the U.S. is capable of dealing with European and Asian issues simultaneously.

A: Let me choose my words carefully. The U.S. has the capability to deal with a conflict in Europe and a conflict in Asia at the same time.

However, it does not have the capability to perform well in both campaigns at the same time. By getting involved in a conflict in Eastern Europe, we, the U.S., are detracting from our ability to contain China and to fight a war against China, should one break out.

Q: Looking at Asia, some countries like North Korea continue to engage in nuclear arms brinkmanship. Will the world become a much more unstable, multipolar world? What is the way forward?

A: North Korean nuclear weapons are a significant problem, for Japan, for South Korea, and even for the U.S. As long as the U.S. maintains close alliances with Japan and South Korea, North Korea will not use its nuclear weapons. The American nuclear umbrella protects both Japan and South Korea from a strike with nuclear weapons from the North.

China is content to allow North Korea to keep its nuclear weapons. China has concluded that North Korean nuclear weapons are a force for stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia more generally.

However, the Chinese worry about Kim Jong Un engaging in nuclear brinkmanship, and the Chinese have told him in no uncertain terms that that is unacceptable. As a result he has curbed his behavior.

If Kim Jong Un goes back down that road, the Chinese will tell him, 'no more' because they don't want a nuclear crisis.

Q: The Biden administration hosted a summit of democracies last year. Do you think this approach is effective in curbing the rise of authoritarian countries?

A: No. This is a geopolitical competition, and we should think of it as a geopolitical competition and not an ideological competition.

The fact that Japan and the U.S. are democracies is very nice, but the truth is that they should be allied against China because China is a threat to both countries, regardless of ideology.

If you take the ideological argument too far, then you get to a point where you say Russia cannot be in the balancing coalition against China, because Russia is not a liberal democracy. I believe that would be foolish. What you ought to do is form an alliance with any powerful country you can find that will help you contain China. China is a formidable adversary.

Q: What can Japan and other countries that are not great powers do to protect stability in the region or the world?

A: Japan should become a key player in the balancing coalition against China and it should go to great lengths to think smartly about how to deal with China as well as influence the U.S. in positive ways.

The Japanese should go to great lengths to explain to the Americans why getting into a fight with the Russians in Eastern Europe does not make good sense, and why the U.S. should be focused, laserlike, on East Asia, and not pay much attention at all to Eastern Europe.