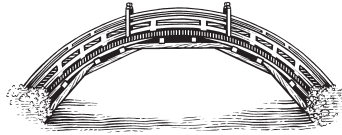


BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

Ending the Strategic Holiday: U.S. Grand Strategy and a “Rising” China

Christopher A. Ford



Ashley J. Tellis

*Balancing Without Containment:
An American Strategy for Managing China*

Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2014 ≈ 105 pp.

Ending the Strategic Holiday: U.S. Grand Strategy and a “Rising” China

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Ashley Telli's valuable new work, *Balancing Without Containment: An American Strategy for Managing China*, helps fill a lamentably empty niche in Western strategic writing about the People's Republic of China (PRC). It is perhaps a shame that there are still such gaps remaining to be filled, but also a pleasure to see an able scholar make thoughtful suggestions.

The United States' Strategic Holiday

Americans were not always bad at strategic thinking, but our strategic holiday as the post-Cold War “hyperpower” seems to have made us intellectually lazy. While Americans once sought to encourage the growth of the PRC's power for strategic reasons, hoping to build up Beijing as a counterweight to the Soviet Union, we continued—in President Obama's words—to “welcome China's rise” long after the end of the Cold War.¹ Many seem to have assumed that economic development would inevitably lead to China's democratization, and indeed its Americanization. As President Bill Clinton put it, “our engagement with China is...the best way to advance our ideals. The more we bring China into the world, the more the world will bring freedom to China.”²

With the tides of history apparently on our side, there seemed to be little need for anything like strategy, nor even much need to have a China policy at all, except simply to embrace the PRC and “engage” with it at every level. Deep thinking was implicitly unnecessary, and indeed for some China experts even discussing the idea of a U.S. competitive strategy was a bad idea. The only way that things could really go wrong would be if the United States “made” China into an adversary by acting as if it might be one. For such thinkers, the answer

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NOTE ~ The views expressed here are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. government.

¹ Stephanie Condon, “Obama: ‘We Welcome China's Rise,’” CBS News, January 20, 2011 ~ <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/obama-we-welcome-chinas-rise>.

² Bill Clinton, “Why I'm Going to China,” *Newsweek*, June 1998 ~ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/newsweek/why.htm>.

to any Sino-American problem was thus always simply to double down on the cure-all of soft-edged engagement.

To be sure, a subset of American thinking about China cast the PRC’s rise more darkly, warning about the implications if the Communist authoritarian oligarchy in Beijing were to continue to amass power. For years, however, many of these warnings seemed to echo too strongly of Cold War concepts and military prescriptions to be taken very seriously by mainstream leaders, who were well aware that whatever the rising PRC was, it was not the same thing as the old Soviet Union. All in all, neither the engagers nor the hawks offered much strategic thinking. This is clearly a problem, however, since it is increasingly recognized that the United States’ relationship with China partakes of elements of both cooperation and competition. How are we to cooperate and compete with the PRC at the same time?

Engage and Compete

Ashley Tellis’s new book does much to meet this need for prescriptive strategic analysis. Indeed, its ambition is nothing less than to provide a full-blown competitive strategy with which the United States can hope to answer the challenges of China’s rise, yet without forgoing the great benefits that economic interdependence and globalization can still provide.

As the title of the book suggests, Tellis promotes a notion of “balancing” that is neither uncritical engagement nor Cold War–style oppositionalism. Equating “containment” with “cutting off ties with Beijing and urging China’s neighbors to do the same,” Tellis sensibly argues that taking this approach vis-à-vis China today is “politically, economically, and practically unthinkable” (p. ix). At the same time, he is also adamant that simply continuing along the well-trodden path of relatively uncritical engagement is unwise. The United States badly needs a real strategy vis-à-vis China in order to preserve both its own interests and those of the prosperity-engendering global order that U.S. hegemony has underwritten for so long. Tellis calls for a strategy tailored to the circumstances of modern globalization, one that shuns easy analogies to the Cold War but is unabashedly competitive nonetheless.

In an implicit rebuke of those who believe that prosperity and international engagement will inevitably “domesticate” China as a good international citizen, Tellis draws attention to idiosyncrasies that make the PRC a worrying giant. Not an analyst transfixed (as some still are) by the rhetoric of “peaceful rise” with which Beijing tries to persuade the West not to worry about growing PRC strength, Tellis warns that China’s ambitions are clear: “at the very least,

Beijing seeks to recover the centrality it enjoyed in Asian geopolitics until the coming of colonialism” (p. 1). Citing PRC strategic writings, Tellis points out that “even before China has completely risen, it is already committed to the objective of enforcing a strict hierarchy in Asia, meaning that Beijing’s position at the top of the continental order is acknowledged and respected by all its neighbors” (p. 4). Moreover, Beijing feels itself to deserve, and is positioning itself to demand, a special role at the center of the world’s political system: “a permanent presence at all the high tables of international governance as a rule maker” (p. 22).

Chinese views of global order, Tellis recounts, are conditioned by an ancient culture that conceives of authority in monist and hierarchical ways and sees “good order [as] possible only through comprehensive centralization.” Despite claims to the contrary by PRC officials, moreover, its strategic culture inhabits a “parabellum paradigm” that views conflict as endemic to the human condition” and happily uses force when that option is believed to exist. All in all, therefore, the stage seems worryingly set for a “risen” China that demands everyone else’s “deference to Chinese prerogatives” (pp. 15–16).

As if this were not enough, Tellis notes the degree to which the PRC’s rising power has been accompanied by the rise of a “pernicious nationalism,” which the Chinese Communist Party in large part has encouraged in an effort to shore up its own shaky legitimacy (p. 17). For Tellis, this suggests the bankruptcy of traditional assumptions that once China develops into a prosperous state it will behave as a good international citizen. So far, he notes, the PRC’s rise actually seems to have made its behavior worse: “The availability of new resources has empowered Beijing to pursue coercive actions that were previously considered out of reach or excessively risky, and either new social forces within the state or the aroused citizenry has legitimized these actions” (p. 17).

However, Tellis is basically a realist. An adherent neither to quasi-Kantian notions of “democratic peace” nor to quasi-essentialist theories about “Chineseness,” he thinks any fully risen China, whatever its political, cultural, or ideological complexion, would likely present grave challenges. “The causes of strife rooted in China’s internal characteristics” make things worse, Tellis writes, but “the perils of growing Chinese preeminence would persist even if such elements did not obtain.... These consequences would emerge simply because of the pressures of competitive international politics” (pp. 18–19). He maintains that the “loss of primacy to China would fundamentally undermine the national security interests of the United States in the most comprehensive sense imaginable” (p. 19). Therefore, Tellis argues that the objective of U.S. grand strategy should be to prevent this—not by stopping or

rolling back China’s development but by taking the steps needed to thwart the possibility that Beijing will be able to convert this rise into a power transition that undermines, and then replaces, the current U.S.-led global operating system, which has brought peace and prosperity to so much of the modern world. Washington thus needs a competitive strategy for dealing with the PRC irrespective of what we might think about its politics. But what should this strategy be?

To begin with, Tellis is emphatic that if the United States wishes to thwart the specter of great-power succession, “suppressing China through naked and premeditated force” is not a feasible option (p. 28). A second option might be to rely on efforts to change the “internal character of China itself” by means of democratization, on the assumption that the advent of democratic governance there would “defang the perils of losing American hegemony” (p. 28). Tellis disfavors this “transformation” approach too, however, partly because it would “inflare U.S.-China relations,” and partly because it is not clear to him that democratization would entirely remove the threat to U.S. interests: “Chinese geopolitical interests could [still] differ from those of the United States... despite their common democratic bonds” (p. 28).

Third, as we have already seen, Tellis rejects Cold War–style containment as a guide to contemporary U.S. strategy, reasoning that modern circumstances are too different from the United States’ previous struggle against Soviet Communism to make such an approach feasible. The rigid, full-spectrum oppositionalism of containment is inappropriate in the Chinese context, he argues, not only because of the United States’ economic interdependence with the PRC—and that of U.S. friends and allies in East Asia—but also because Washington does not today view Chinese imperialism and ideology in the same way as it did those of the Soviet Union (pp. 29–30).

Tellis acknowledges that the United States’ economic engagement with China has helped create the current security problem and that “continued economic benefits of trading with China will come only at increased security risks to the United States and its allies” (p. 32). Detaching China from the globalized world, however, would be neither feasible nor beneficial. The best answer, Tellis says, is for the United States to “balance Beijing’s growing capabilities by pursuing policies that simultaneously increase China’s stake in the existing global system and raise the costs of abusing its power” (p. ix). Not resisting the PRC’s rise would be extremely unwise, but Tellis is emphatic that this resistance must be approached in a new way. The advantage of balancing, as Tellis conceives it, is that it does not require the United States to try to stop China’s economic expansion—which in this

era of globalization would hurt everyone. Balancing represents a Goldilocks answer between the provocative harshness of containment and the passive resignation of inaction (p. 33).

Elements of Balancing

Tellis argues that balancing should involve four elements. First, it requires supporting the rise of states around China—and an increasing degree of coordination and collaboration between them—in order to maximize their ability to resist misuses of PRC power in the region (p. x). The objective here is a “regional equilibrium deriving from the presence of many powerful states on China’s periphery all cooperating among themselves and aided whenever necessary by the hegemonic power of the United States” (p. 37).

Second, balancing should involve “selectively deepening globalization” by wrapping the states of the Pacific Rim in a richer network of trade and investment liberalization agreements that will help the United States and its trading partners gain from globalization and lay a better groundwork for future growth. Significantly, Tellis advises that the success of this approach depends on “keeping China out of these regional free-trade agreements for as long as possible” (p. 50).

The third element of Tellis’s balancing strategy concerns the military—though not as a preemptive tool for arresting the ascent of a rival but rather as a deterrent force with which to reassure U.S. allies and dissuade the PRC’s heavy-handedness with its neighbors. Because the world’s current politico-economic operating system depends on “the superior military capabilities that protect the global system and enforce its rules,” Washington must “maintain its extant military superiority indefinitely” (p. 54).

In common with many thinkers these days, Tellis’s recipe for preserving preeminent U.S. power-projection capabilities stresses sophisticated technology—in particular, stealthy and unmanned long-range strike capabilities, submarine forces, space and cyber capabilities, and the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) tools needed to ensure access to the information on which combat effectiveness depends. He supports robust defenses against ballistic missile threats but also emphasizes the (often overlooked) need to defend against long-range cruise missiles. Tellis also urges U.S. planners not to forget nuclear weapons concepts and capabilities, which he suggests have been neglected (pp. 56–59, 65–66).

Tellis’s discussion of the so-called air-sea battle concept is insightful. He correctly points out that breaking the “kill chain” of PRC

anti-access/area-denial capabilities might well require strikes against targets on the Chinese mainland—in particular, against ISR and communications assets that serve to interdict the targeting information required by PRC strike forces. He is realistic enough to recognize that this is a bold and potentially risky approach; for while the likely effectiveness of such U.S. capabilities presumably gives real deterrent value to them, strikes against the mainland would indeed be a step up the escalatory ladder.

At the same time, however, Tellis disputes current U.S. proponents of “offshore balancing” strategies. Any warfighting plan that aims to sit back and wait for a distant blockade to strangle the PRC, he suggests, would leave U.S. friends and allies gravely vulnerable for a considerable period of time in the event of war. Adopting such an approach would undermine alliance relationships in advance of conflict, undercut the broader U.S. strategy of trying to build up regional friends as counterweights to PRC power, and help provoke their preemptive accommodation with Chinese power. Tellis acknowledges the risks entailed in air-sea battle concepts of kill chain targeting, but he clearly thinks the United States is stuck with it as the least bad alternative (pp. 63–65).

Given that economic power is in many ways the foundation on which overall national power is built—a reality that Beijing long ago recognized and on which its own engagement with the West has been premised—Tellis also discusses the importance to U.S. strategy of revitalizing the domestic economy. This domestic economic prong is the fourth element of his balancing strategy. Notably, however, this is not a prescription for yet more *dirigiste* spending and demand stimulation at home. Instead, it is a much more sophisticated call for unleashing the Schumpeterian “gales of creative destruction” of free market innovation. Such fast-paced technological change and economic innovation can be disruptive and even painful at home, but Tellis is right to identify such gales as the key to long-term growth, productive efficiency, and economic capacity. A serious competitive strategy vis-à-vis China would indeed, as Tellis recommends, promote “the highest velocity of technical change possible across the spectrum of civilian to military endeavors” (p. 67). This is the key to continued U.S. superiority.

Interestingly, Tellis is not intrinsically opposed to foreign borrowing. Instead, his point goes more to what is funded. It would be a geostrategic dead end to continue to use borrowing for “sustaining current consumption or paying for previously incurred social program obligations.” If Washington does keep borrowing, however, it would enhance the country’s strategic competitiveness and odds of long-term success to foster what is needed to

thrive amid the Schumpeterian gales: education, infrastructure improvements, and technological R&D (pp. 70–71).

To Contain Misbehavior

Tellis has written an important work that deserves attention in the U.S. policy community. One might quarrel about whether his dichotomy between balancing and Cold War containment is quite as strong as he thinks. After all, the famous U.S. National Security Council (NSC) strategy document NSC 68 involved a good deal of “balance” thinking, including an emphasis on political and economic vitality and assistance to friends and allies so that they could build themselves up in order to better resist Soviet pressure. It was also part of the United States’ strategy to build up countries around the Soviet Union’s periphery—not least, as it turned out, the PRC itself—to balance Soviet power. Nor was Cold War–era strategy quite so fixated on military measures and economic warfare as current stereotypes might suggest. Parts of NSC 68 indicate that its authors agreed with Tellis on the importance of domestic economic vigor, productivity, and technological innovation as components of national power.³ George Kennan’s famous “long telegram” from Moscow also spoke in holistic terms about the importance of U.S. national reinvigoration as an element of competitiveness.⁴

Moreover, U.S. Cold War strategy was not quite so rigid in its execution as Tellis’s dichotomy might seem to suggest. It did not shy from encouraging Soviet economic isolation, but as time wore on, this effort remained firm only with respect to militarily useful dual-use technologies—an area, ironically, in which one might today perhaps wish the outside world had been more confrontational with the PRC over the last three decades. Economic dealings with the Soviet Union depended on the mood of the times, expanding in the détente period of the 1970s and shrinking thereafter, before expanding again in the later 1980s, with European countries consistently more willing to trade than Washington. On the whole, economic praxis vis-à-vis the Soviet Union was rather heterodox. In practice, in other words, Cold War containment was a more subtle and flexible instrument, and less of a rigid recipe, than modern

³ “A Report to the National Security Council—NSC 68,” April 14, 1950, available at the Harry S. Truman Library ~ http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/10-1.pdf.

⁴ George Kennan to George Marshall, Telegram [“Long Telegram”], February 22, 1946, Harry S. Truman Administration File, Elsey Papers ~ https://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/coldwar/documents/pdf/6-6.pdf.

stereotypes—or contemporary PRC talking points intended to delegitimize more confrontational U.S. postures—would have it.

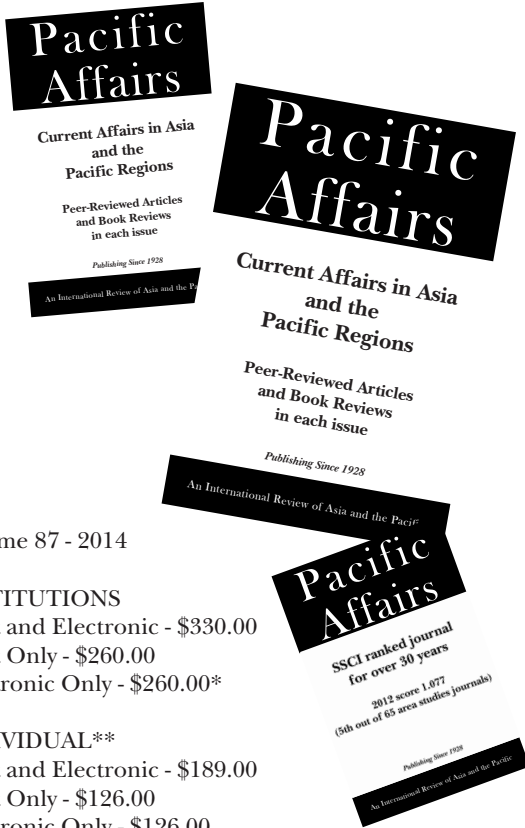
But these are mere quibbles, for Tellis is correct that dealing with the PRC today requires a different recipe than the United States employed during the Cold War. Ultimately, the phrase “containment” derives from Kennan’s call in 1946 for “the containment of Russian expansive tendencies”—that is, it was aimed at international misbehavior, not Russian economic development. In this sense, at least, it is hardly crazy to desire a limited sort of containment today vis-à-vis China. Kennan attempted to match his recipe to the Soviet Union that the United States confronted in 1946, and those who would contain Chinese misbehavior today—which is not at all the same thing as containing China’s prosperity and growth—need prescriptions appropriate to the particular target of the modern PRC. Tellis offers them with aplomb and persuasiveness. *Balancing Without Containment* deserves, and will reward, a careful read. ♦

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