



‘Longer Telegram’ a recipe for war with China

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In late January the Atlantic Council, the UK Foreign Office-funded quasi-official NATO lobby in Washington, released a 26,000-word diatribe against China under the pretentious title “The Longer Telegram: Towards a New American China Strategy”. It was by-lined “Anonymous”, although at least one former senior American diplomat with decades of experience in China believes the author was Matt Pottinger, China strategist and deputy national security advisor in the just-departed Trump Administration.

Pottinger played a central role in heightened aggressivity against China, culminating in May-July 2020, when five top national security officials made coordinated public attacks on the Communist Party of China (CPC), essentially declaring US policy to be regime change in the world’s largest nation. The harsh rhetoric and aggressive prescriptions for dealing with China contained in the “Longer Telegram” certainly conform to the confrontational approach taken by the Trump Administration, which brought US-China relations to their lowest point since diplomatic ties were established in 1979.

A wrong-headed historical parallel

The title “Longer Telegram” alludes to the 1946 “Long Telegram”, which American diplomat George Kennan sent from the US Embassy in Moscow, calling for a long-term strategy of “containment” against the Soviet Union. Kennan argued that the Soviet Union would ultimately collapse internally, and the United States should pursue a patient policy of war avoidance, military containment, and engagement where possible. Kennan’s publication of the same ideas the following year in the Council on Foreign Relations journal *Foreign Affairs*, under the by-line “X”, helped to herald the beginning of the Cold War.

President Dwight Eisenhower, soon after taking office in 1953, convened “Project Solarium”, a competitive study by three working groups of American diplomats and military strategists, to devise a long-term strategy for dealing with the perceived Soviet threat. Kennan was among the participants, and his “containment” approach, as adopted by Eisenhower and continued thereafter, largely guided relations with Moscow for nearly 40 years—with periodic interruptions into “hot” crises, influenced by Eisenhower’s militant Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and what Ike himself called the military-industrial complex—until the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Treaty Organisation of military allies collapsed.

Kennan’s “containment” was a big step backwards from President Franklin Roosevelt’s vision of post-war peace based on economic cooperation, including with the Soviet Union. It led to dangerous balancing on the brink of nuclear war, but there were countervailing impulses



Chinese President Xi Jinping (centre) with members of the Politburo and various committees. Photo: AFP/Greg Baker

during that time, such as Eisenhower’s joint action with Moscow during the Suez Crisis in 1956 or the diplomacy under President John F. Kennedy that pulled both countries back from the near disaster of a nuclear exchange during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. The just-published “Longer Telegram” lacks any of the nuance or war-avoidance elements of the Cold War policies. It is a recipe for war with China.

Drawing ‘red lines’

The Atlantic Council’s “Longer Telegram” begins with three “key points” for shaping a new US China policy:

“The single most important challenge facing the United States and the democratic world in the twenty-first century is the rise of an increasingly authoritarian and aggressive China under Xi Jinping. China has long had an integrated, operational strategy for dealing with the United States. The United States has so far had no such strategy regarding China. This is a dereliction of national responsibility.

“US strategy and policy towards China must be laser-focused on the fault lines among Xi and his inner circle—aimed at changing their objectives and behaviour and thus their strategic course. Communist Party elites are much more divided about Xi’s leadership and vast ambitions than is widely appreciated.

“The foremost goal of US strategy should be to cause China’s ruling elites to conclude that it is in China’s best interests to continue operating within the US-led liberal international order rather than building a rival order, and that it is in the Chinese Communist Party’s best interests to not attempt to expand China’s borders or export its political model beyond China’s shores.”

The author hinges the entire misnamed “strategy” on the notion that the United States can engineer a coup against President Xi Jinping by leading circles of the CPC. The goal is to change the direction of Chinese policy away from Xi’s alleged reckless drive for world domination on behalf of a

revisionist authoritarian system that he personally intends to impose on the planet.

Mr Anonymous asserts, without evidence, that there is a simmering revolt against the Chairman within the CPC's top echelons. Supposedly underlying the revolt is a desire on the part of leading Politburo and Central Committee members to return China to the pre-Xi Jinping era of full Chinese engagement in the present "liberal international order". Before Xi came along, the argument continues, China was a status-quo participant in the USA-led system of globalisation and free trade. With Xi Jinping out of the picture, China will rejoin the global order.

From that dangerous and unreal baseline, Anonymous goes on to define a series of "red lines" that the USA must impose on China on pain of facing war. These should be officially presented to the top Chinese leadership:

- No Chinese use of weapons of mass destruction against the United States or any US allies.
- No attack on Taiwan or any of its offshore islands.
- No attack on Japan's interests in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), including the disputed Senkaku Islands (called Diaoyu by China).
- No hostile action in the South China Sea.
- No attack of any kind on any US treaty allies.

Anonymous also calls for a concerted effort to split Russia from China by rebalancing Russia-American relations and to encourage closer Japanese-Russian ties, with the aim of breaking up the strategic partnership between Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin. The USA should accelerate build-up of the Quad (USA, Japan, Australia, India) as a military alliance and expand it to include Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) members such as the Philippines and Thailand.

On the geoeconomics front, Anonymous calls for actions to preserve the role of the US dollar as the global reserve currency, and for open warfare against Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Since it was launched in 2013 to build land and sea commercial routes across Eurasia, Africa, and South America, the BRI has invested an estimated US\$1 trillion in development projects, including rail and port infrastructure.

Cooler heads?

Some better informed China specialists have blasted the Anonymous tome. Former Ambassador Chas

Freeman, who was translator for Henry Kissinger and President Nixon on their first visits to China in 1971-72 and later served at the US Embassy in Beijing when relations were established, warned that the danger of the "Longer Telegram" provocation is that in the McCarthyite climate that now prevails in the United States, such schemes could be hard to reject by a President Joe Biden facing a deeply divided nation.

Paul Heer, a retired CIA analyst on China, called the "Longer Telegram" "profoundly misguided if not dangerous". The "fixation on Xi" is wrong, in his view.

A former US Naval Attaché in China decried the Anonymous piece as clueless about the actual consensus structure of the Chinese leadership, which is unified behind Xi Jinping.

It can be hoped that cooler heads in the Biden Administration will reject the Atlantic Council's provocation. One encouraging sign is that in the September-October 2019 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and his top advisor on China, Kurt Campbell, published a joint article titled "Competition Without Catastrophe". They rejected all the axiomatic points Anonymous would raise, arguing that it would be folly for the USA to attempt to overthrow or even change the policy of the CPC; better to "live with each other as major powers" and seek a "steady state of clear-eyed co-existence". The authors argued that China is fully integrated into the global economy and is thoroughly intertwined with the United States. They described the CPC leadership as "remarkably adaptable". China, they noted, is the number one trading partner with two-thirds of all the countries of the world. They rejected both containment and the idea of a Washington-Beijing "Grand Bargain" to divide up the world into spheres of influence.

Above all, the authors argued that the highest US priorities are domestic: to invest in science, education, and infrastructure, and encourage immigration. Instead of denouncing the Belt and Road Initiative, compete with it by offering development financing. And repair the damage to traditional alliances done during Trump's Presidency.

The Biden Administration will take its time developing a comprehensive China policy. It can be hoped that the views expressed in 2019 by Sullivan and Campbell will inform that deliberation, and the call for confrontation with China will be rejected.