

The American Containment Policy in East Asia Reconsidered : A Research Note on the Korean and Vietnam Wars

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This article is undertaken as a research note aiming to reconsider realist accounts for American containment policy in East Asia during the Cold War period, and address opening discussions over some alternative explanations with the particular reference to the two battlefields of the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Four possible scenarios are suggested in the hope of revising the neorealist utility of the containment doctrine by adopting sociological and path-dependent revisionist explanations as alternative ways to tackle the neorealist orthodoxy. A central argument in this note is that the US containment policy in East Asia was not only a logical outgrowth of American grand strategy on the neorealist basis, but also a multiple interest complex which has been socially constructed by the mutual formation between internal

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and external factors. The tasks ahead, thus, converge on how to promote and reformulate the analytical combination between the traditional way of neorealist accounts and its alternative approaches in a more constructive fashion.

Key word : US containment policy, Neorealist orthodoxy, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, Path-dependent theory, Sociological approaches

I. Introduction

While the origins of the Cold War came from Europe, actual events and conflicts emerged and developed in East Asia and elsewhere. In 1949, the thirty-year long Chinese civil war ended in the Communist's victory under the leadership of Mao Zedong. This had a major impact not only on international affairs in East Asia but also on perceptions and grand strategies of both Moscow and Washington. In 1950, the North Korean attack on South Korea was interpreted as a part of the general communist offensive, and a test case for American resolve and the will of the United Nations to withstand aggression from the Communist bloc. In 1965, the US intervention in South Vietnam, likewise, was understood as the second test of American containment policy aimed to deter the expansion of the Communist infiltration in East Asia. The two hot land wars in East Asia called for the US engagement to contain the expansion of Soviet-led Communism, which had been a main kernel of American foreign policy at almost every point of historical junctures during the Cold War (Lafeber 2002). The plethora of

existing accounts for the US containment policy in the Cold War era has proceeded in line with the (neo-) realist tradition of international relation theories. Indeed, the orthodox accounts for American containment strategies in East Asia have been deeply anchored in the structural stability thesis of bipolar international systems under which containment policy is supposed to be enduring.

However, to what extent can the causes of the US intervention in the Korean and Vietnam Wars be explained solely by the doctrine of containment? What if Washington would intend to attempt other strategic objectives beyond the deterrence of the Communist expansion? What if the US containment policy would be shaped and reproduced by its path-dependent sequences embedded in previous events, rather than the pre-established international systems? As Bill McSweeney (1999) articulates from sociological perspectives, the sources of foreign policy are socially constructed by multiple interactions between internal and external factors, which are immanently bound to defy any predetermined conditions set by neorealist international systems. By advancing counterfactual views on the US containment policy, we call neorealist orthodox accounts into question, and seek to locate some innovative explanations of causal links between the doctrine of containment and the US military presence in the two battlefields. To this end, we take the neorealist systemic explanation as the base theory supporting the conventional understanding of containment policy. Then, four possible alternatives are considered here in order to reveal the weaknesses of the neorealist explanation, filter containment policy through various analytical prisms, and rethink the genuine value of the US containment policy over the two hot wars in East Asia.

II . Realism and the US Containment Policy

Characteristically, proponents of the neorealist thesis are prone to view post-war US foreign manoeuvres in East Asia as a structural outgrowth of the bipolar competition between US-led capitalist bloc and Soviet-led socialist bloc. The major two land wars – the Korean War (1950-1953) and the Vietnam War (1965-1975) – are deemed as the power-balancing actions produced by international bipolarity. In this regard, Kenneth Waltz (1979, 171) addresses that “in a bipolar world there are no peripheries: with only two powers capable of acting on a world scale, anything that happens anywhere is potentially of concern to both of them.” International structure defines the arrangement of the parts of a system, and structures vary along the specification of functions of formally differentiated parts and the relative capabilities of the actor units themselves. The neorealist idea, it can be said, is based upon a sociological notion of institutional adaptations which are defined as “the process of structural differentiation and the concomitant development of patterns and mechanisms which integrate the differentiated parts” (Parsons 1961, 219). The explanation of the US containment policy from the perspective of neorealist structuralism, therefore, sheds light on the US intervention in the two major hot wars in East Asia as a logical and best solution formed under the given international structure of the Cold War.

From the outset of the Cold War, the containment policy was at the core of the United States’ grand strategies to deter the geopolitical influences of the Soviet Union under the bipolar system. First articulated by President Truman in 1947, containment involved maintaining the United States’ military presence around

the world, as well as supporting 'friendly' regimes economically and militarily (Leffler 1992). The Truman Doctrine was the starting point for the strategy of containment of communism and it had been constantly developed and expanded by successive US presidents during the Cold War. Indeed, it remained as the backbone of US foreign policy during the Cold War, aimed at preventing the Soviet expansion.

There had been, by and large, two ambiguities in formulating the contours of the containment policy until the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950: (1) the question of the ends—whether to contain Soviet power specifically or to contain communism as a whole; and (2) the question of means—whether to spend resources to prevent any expansion of Soviet power or just in certain key areas that seemed critical to the balance of power (Kennan 1958; Nye 2000, 124-125; Gaddis 2005, 89-109). These uncertainties stemmed from the differences between George Kennan's conception of United States interests and that of National Security Council Document 68 (hereafter NSC-68) spearheaded by Paul H. Nitze. Kennan dissented from the rather expansive version of containment that Truman proclaimed, arguing that all that was necessary to maintain the balance of power was to secure strategic centres of US industrial-military capability from hostile hands of Soviet-led communism. In this sense, Kennan's tactical picture of containment required fewer military means in full scale and more selective focusing on a few vital areas for the US interests. On the other hand, NSC-68 contended that Kennan's strategy of defending selected strong points would no longer suffice to balance out the influence of the Soviet Union; the emphasis rather would have to be on perimeter defence, with all points along the perimeter

considered of equal importance. The authors of NSC-68 doubted how to make clear distinction between peripheral and vital interests. In a nutshell, whereas Kennan attempted to define containment as much narrower limiting selected vital points, NSC-68 sought to include more comprehensive strategies of containment.

The outbreak of the Korean War marked a critical historical juncture at which such ambiguities came to a close (Acheson 1987; Stueck 2002). Kennan's approach to containment lost ground, but the NSC-68 predictions of Soviet expansionism had been justified enough to gain the upper hand over Kennan's position. The Korean Peninsula, even until the war broke out, had been excluded from the United States defence perimeter, and this had been officially formalized by Secretary of State Dean Acheson's articulation of this position. However, the United States, under the auspices of the United Nations, marshalled the united military force of 16 countries to counterattack the invasion of communist enemies in June 1950. This sudden change in Washington's decision to include Korea into the defence perimeter of the US containment policy came about on the basis of the three rationales: (1) the fact that North Korea resorted to military invasion in order to attempt to unify the country; (2) the perception that the North's military action was inspired and supported by the Soviet Union; and (3) the US failure to do more to prevent or postpone the fall of China and its consequences (Foot 1985). Despite a limited war, the Korean War shows the two important lessons to decision makers in Washington. In the first place, the strategy of containment should be expanded to include all points that are not only physically faced with communism but also have the potential of being converted into communism. In the second place, it turned out to be evident

that communism was fundamentally monolithic right after the Chinese Red Army entered the Korean War, so that the rhetoric of containment policy further emphasized the ideological goal of preventing the spread of communism. The experience of the Korean War, therefore, resulted in enlarging the US containment strategy to cover the whole areas of strategically crucial points— with no peripheries under the bipolar system, just like what Waltz aptly asserted.

This expanded version of containment had been deliberately reproduced and maintained by the successive US presidents from Dwight Eisenhower to Lyndon Johnson, albeit the oscillation of its intensity and scale (Gaddis 2005). Eisenhower claimed that containment was a cowardly accommodation to communism and the right approach was to roll back communism. After the fall of Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the creation of the South-East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO) reflected Eisenhower's and Dulles' emphasis on multilateral efforts to deter communist advances and prepare for emergency calls of local conflicts in Asia. The Kennedy administration further deepened the US commitment to the survival of South Vietnam by means of the dispatch of additional military advisors and the economic aid transfer to South Vietnam. In addition, the Johnson administration identified North Vietnam's infiltration of its agents via the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam as the root of the problem, and approved 'Operation Rolling Thunder,' the systemic bombardment of North Vietnam in February 1965. Eventually, the failure of the bombing campaign to deter the North Vietnamese led the United States to send combat troops to South Vietnam to fight Vietnamese Communists in July 1965 (Herring 1996; McNamara et al. 1999). As Joseph Nye (2000, 124) points out, it can be properly

understood in the context of incessant reproductions of containment policy in the post-Korean War period that “the US made the costly mistake of becoming involved in Vietnam’s civil war, and for nearly two decades (1954 to 1975) the United States tried to prevent Communist control of Vietnam.”

The costly engagement in the Vietnam War and the domestic turmoil that undercut support for the policy of containment rendered the United States vacate from the bloody battlefield. Since the late period of the Vietnam War, the Nixon administration used détente as a means to pursue the goals of containment because the Vietnam War came up with disillusionment in American public opinion with Cold War interventions. Moreover, the Sino-Soviet border dispute in 1969 led the Nixon administration to open diplomatic relations with China, and thus create a three-way balance of power in East Asia rather than pushing the Soviets and the Chinese together. The two major land wars provided the US policy makers with the turning points of the reflexive revision, indeed. It is, however, fair to state that Washington under the circumstance of bipolar system, despite the swinging pendulum of its commitment and perception, kept using the containment policy as the main grand strategy in order to check and balance the Soviet expansion in East Asia and any other points of possible conflicts with Communist regimes.

III. Theoretical Gaps in Realism

From the viewpoint of neorealist accounts, it stands to reason

that the US involvement in the Korean and Vietnam War was based upon Washington's rational decisions on strategic transfers of the containment policy into all moving frontiers along the balance-of-power structure. Such an unmistakable statement is able to stretch the notional utility of realism-centred explanations into the origins of the US containment policy, but also inevitably encounters some critiques challenging its monolithic orthodox stance to international affairs. Indeed, it is important to remember that the over reliance on the theoretical dependability of classical realism or neorealism would fail to embrace viable interpretations from other social theories, thereby undermining balanced standpoints and spawning the scholarly arrogance arguing structural positivism as a universal remedy in theory (Hollis and Smith 1990; Rosenberg 1994).

By definition, classical realism in varying degrees had founded its theory of international politics on the understanding of human nature as well as will to power (Hobbs 1904; Morgenthau 1948). In contrast, Waltz (1959) delivered on the premise of his systematic inquiry: neither man nor the state ultimately accounts for war, foreign policy or any other recurrent outcomes in international politics, but the structure of anarchy and its effects do. The international system, therefore, is characterized by the structural condition of anarchy, defined as the absence of central rule in international governance. As a result, states, the wielders of the ultimate arbiter of force, are its constitutive units, and the international system consists of a set of interacting units exhibiting behavioural regulations and having an identity over time. The fundamentals of international politics must be systemic, since how the relationship among states is organized affects states' behaviour

towards one another. In a nutshell, Waltz's neorealist model was strictly third images in orientation in the sense of its preoccupation on structural effects of systems, rather than the capabilities of the units comprising the system or how the international system is constructed(Gowa 1986). It is in this context that the US containment policy was firmly identified with the de rigueur result imposed by the preset conditions of the international system and thereby would not be voluntarily transformed without the significant shift of the international system.

Such predetermined tenets of structural realism, on the other hand, are likely to face some theoretical challenges from historical observations and sociological judgements, both of which put more analytical concerns on the second image rather than the third one: the role of the state in generating the anarchical structure of the international system; the impacts of domestic politics on the formation of the international system; and the historical evolution of international society as well as its constituent units(Bull 1977; Gourevitch 1978; Wendt 1999). Given that a hypothetical-deductive approach to the theory formulation and the covering law protocol of explanation, which is characteristic of the natural sciences and economics, has been explicitly adopted by neorealism, the main target of theoretical critiques has been, primarily, focused on its methodological epistemology in the following three dimensions: (1) ahistorical positivism; (2) the path-dependence reversed fallacy; and (3) lack of the internal-external nexus. These critiques provide a good platform for new interpretations of containment policy, which will be suggested as our future task in the next section.

The first point is that structural realism is a static, conservative theory aiming to accept the prevailing order and seeking only to

isolate historical aspects of the system in order to understand how it works (Wallerstein 1984; Cox 1986). The structural realists portray the structure of international system as an ahistorical structure whose existence is independent of states, rather than constructed by them. Accordingly, realism is, fundamentally, designed as a 'problem-solving' theory, with no serious concerns about how to describe the historical evolution of international affairs. The new idea of containment policy contemplating alternative explanations on its social origins is not in the structural realist's vocabulary. Secondly, the chronic shortage of historicity in structural realism would be entrapped into the 'path-dependence-reversed' fallacy (Hobson 2007). The historical sociology of international relations confirms that the path dependent sequences which neorealism sticks to have been actually reversed by its ideological prism filtering historical facts into supplementary components subject to the international system, with no regard to causal links between historical events. Thus, varieties of historical events embedded in the US containment policy need to be reformulated and rearranged by the structure of the international system in the form of path dependence, but the reality comes to a distorted chain of path dependence sequences. The third pattern of critiques includes difficulties in connecting the internal with external systems (Milner and Keohane 1996). By sterilising internal dynamics of political processes, structural realism only highlights the role of the systems identified with the international anarchy. As a result, less attention has been paid to connections between the internal attributes of states on the one hand, and the international system on the other hand. The effects of the second image, thus, are bound to be sidestepped from the main discussion when it would

be applied to the origins of containment policy.

IV. Possible Alternatives for Reconsidering Containment Policy

Filtering the US containment policy through other perspectives triggers us to aware the weaknesses of the systemic explanation and look for some other plausible scenarios diverting the origins of containment policy from the neorealist essences. The poverty of historicity or sociological imagination in structural realism, as discussed above, hampers us from finding alternative answers to the evolution of containment policy. Nevertheless, with respect to anomalous possibilities in explaining the formation of the US containment policy in East Asia, our tasks ahead primarily boil down to the following four alternative approaches.

The first observation for alternative scenarios begins with the fact that US-led military forces crossed the borderline of the North-South division in the Korean Peninsular during the Korean War. Washington's overdrawing a line over the 38th parallel during the war undermined and violated the principle of containment that the United States aimed at preventing the communist expansion to South Korea, rather than trespassing the defence perimeter. Bruce Cumings(1990) asserts that the US troops march into North Korea across the 38th parallel in order to 'liberate' it in November 1950 was the action for the expansion beyond the nature of containment, and, moreover, this called for the Chinese involvement in the

battlefield that made the war more bloody and prolonged fighting. In this regard, Rosemary Foot (1985, 26-27) contended that the war with China would involve the United States in the 'wrong' war on the ground that "as U.S./U.N. forces crossed into North Korea, it appeared to the newly established government in Peking that American troops were taking the traditional Japanese invasion route into Manchuria, the industrial heartland of China." In this sense, the traditional concept of containment is unable to explain the United States' abortive attempt to liberate North Korea. Rather, it would be miscalculation(or misperception) that Washington believed that China would keep silent even though the US troops marched into the territories of North Korea.

Secondly, it is also questionable how the containment policy can advocate the US intervention in the two civil wars beyond the international consensus of 'non-intervention' in domestic affairs. The conflict in the Korean War was a civil war, so that foreigners, particularly the United States, should have stayed out of an internal affair(Cumings 1990). However, this question is more compatible with the Vietnam War than the Korean War, because there was, in case of the latter, the clear evidence of North Korea's crossing the 38th parallel with the approval and support of the Soviet Union and China whereas the civil war in Vietnam was not a typical proxy war of superpowers. According to Yuen Foong Khong(1999, 190-191), many decision-makers, including even US officials, saw the conflict in Vietnam as a civil war in itself, and thus the united action under the auspice of the UN, considered desirable in the Korean War, was difficult to be obtained in the case of the Vietnam War. After all, the United States by itself continued to bear the brunt of efforts in preventing South Vietnam

from falling, worrying about the so-called 'Domino' effect from Vietnam to its neighbouring countries(McNamara et al. 1999). However, it is still problematic whether the rhetoric of containment could be justifiable on the circumvention of the domestic affairs and the promotion of the external power's military intervention in civil wars.

Thirdly, the containment policy embedded in the structural effects of the bipolar system fails to make persuasive accounts for the US inaction in another two major episodes of the communist offensive in East Asia: the victory of communism in China in 1949 and the victory of Vietnamese communism at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. In these cases where the United States stood by while the power of its rival, the Soviet bloc, was significantly augmented, the correlation between the international bipolar structure and its associated dynamics of military interventions would seem less impressive and plausible. As for an alternative to the structural explanations of these two episodes, a group of scholars suggest the path-dependent theory, which means that to what extent the US administrations responded to an earlier crisis would act as an important constraint on its response to the next crisis (Khong 1992; Stueck 2002). In the logic of path dependency, the US failure to respond to the fall of China resulted in raising the negative perception of its strategic and political vulnerability at the international and domestic level, which made it difficult for American troops not to intervene in the Korean War. In turn, the US intervention in Korea and the consequence of these actions—overdrawing a line over the 38th parallel and calling for the Chinese troops—made the Eisenhower administration extremely cautious in deciding whether to respond militarily to the Vietminh's

siege of the French garrison at Dien Bien Phu. Once again, the decision not to intervene in 1954 to save the northern part of Vietnam, however, forced the United States to be set on an alternative path of policy dependence whose increasing returns primarily centred on the institutionalization of Washington's perception that it should intervene in Vietnam in 1965(Goldstone 1998; Pierson 2004). In consequences, such a path-dependent approach is different from the international systemic argument, focusing on institutional constraints left by the multiple complexity reflecting historical legacies and learning effects of the previous phases, rather than the simple dimension of the static structure of international bipolarity. Tracing historical sequences of the changing contours of the US containment policy and its related internal mechanism of decision-making processes contributes to important analytic bridges between external conditions(international bipolarity) and domestic politics by not only looking at the institutional arrangements that structure relations between the two but also working at the level of middle-range theory(Thelen and Steinmo 1992; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003).

The final scenario of counterfactual approaches is found in a sociological interpretation: key dimensions of the US containment policy would be influenced and formulated by how to maintain the political credibility at the domestic level and its impact on foreign policy(Alexander an Giesen 1987; Evans 1993; Milner and Keohane 1996). The macro-micro link based upon the assumption of mutual influences between international factors and domestic social forces brings the social construction of foreign policies back to the front of our discussion over the social origins of the US containment policy in the Korean and Vietnam Wars(Buzan 1991; McSweeney

1999; Milliken 2001). Along with structural circumstances of the international system, the US domestic politics was also a significantly crucial factor in deciding the US administration to go on the track of military intervention in international or regional affairs. Losing China in 1949 affected the US response to Korea in line with the domestic reflections and projections regarding the US failure in China. The fall of China, for instance, gave fuel to Senator McCarthy's charges that the State Department was infiltrated by communists, and undermined the domestic credibility of the Truman administration. Accordingly, another possible failure in responding to the communist offensive in the Korean Peninsula could have been politically catastrophic to policymakers in Washington in the sense of domestic power politics, which eventually came to push the Truman administration to engage proactively in the Korean War. Likewise, the Johnson administration was placed under a similar pressure from domestic politics, given that if South Vietnam fell, Washington would have to face the domestic backlash against its stunted containment policy, thereby undermining its legitimate governability in the dimension of domestic governance. It can be fair to state that such a critical feedback from the mechanism of domestic politics prompted Washington to be on the move towards military engagement with the Vietnam War in 1965. We now know that how to maintain political credibility and legitimacy in the domestic affairs as well as how to deal with societal forces challenging the government's foreign policy needs to be included as one of important factors in constructing the US containment policy in East Asia during the Cold War period.

V. Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this research note is to call into question the neorealist understanding of the containment doctrine which has been taken for granted in accounting for the US military enforcement in the two major theatres of war: Korea and Vietnam. This note is also aimed to suggest the opening discussion for a further development and deepening of sociological imagination for alternative ways beyond the conventional approach to containment policy. The four different approaches are juxtaposed in parallel with the neorealist orthodoxy rooted in the international bipolar system in order to propose some alternative interpretations to complement the weaknesses of the realism-obsessed thesis. In doing so, they not only demonstrate the weak points of realist systemic explanations but also make us rethink some other historical and social factors surrounding containment policies beyond the bipolar structure. The alternative analyses bring to the fore the important independent variables which are often missing in the neorealist camp: the expansive inclination inherent in characteristics of containment, in particular, America's overdrawing a line over the 38th parallel in the Korean War; the justifiability of military intervention in civil wars; the historical legacies of the previous decisions; and the sociological factor of the credibility maintenance in domestic politics. A vital point worthy of attention is how to find out a feasible way of enhancing the explanatory power by combining international systemic views with alternative approaches described above in an eclectic fashion. Particularly, the method of historical sociology—with the special reference to path dependence theory and the micro-macro linkage—leads us to pay more

attention to the processes of intersections between a historical international relations theories and the social origins of foreign policy and military intervention (Jarvis 1989; Hobsen and Lawson 2008). In a nutshell, further comprehensive studies on explanatory variations in US grand strategies in ways unaccounted for by international systemic theories are necessarily called for, in order to reformulate a more synthetic explanation on the containment policy and its entailing effects on the US intervention in East Asia during the Cold War by reconciling neorealist structuralism and its alternatives altogether.

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본 연구노트는 냉전기 미국의 동아시아 봉쇄정책에 관한 기존의 현실주의에 입각한 논의를 재조명하기 위해 몇 가지 새로운 대안적 설명 방식을 한국전쟁과 베트남전쟁의 사례를 중심으로 제시하고자 한다. 두 전쟁은 냉전기 미국의 외교정책을 봉쇄정책으로 규정화하는 데 중요한 계기가 된 역사적인 사건이었음에도 불구하고, 이 전쟁에 대한 국제적 맥락, 지역적 특성, 전쟁의 국내·국제적 영향, 역사사회학적 거시적 인과분석 등을 바탕으로 비교분석한 연구가 풍부하지 않은 상황이다. 신현실주의를 기반으로 하는 기존의 강력한 분석틀에서 우리는 쉽게 몰역사적 분석과 기계적인 해석이라는 방법론적 맹점을 발견할 수 있다. 이에 대한 대안적 접근법으로 본고는 역사사회학적 재해석과 경로의존성에 관한 분석을 강조함으로써, 한국전쟁과 베트남전쟁간의 연관성과 그것이 지닌 세계사적 의미를 미국의 동아시아 봉쇄정책에 투영하고자 한다. 따라서, 본고는 미국의 동아시아 봉쇄정책이 국제체제의 신현실주의적 관점과 더불어 국내정치와 국제체제간의 상호작용이 역사적으로 그리고 사회적으로 재구성된다는 관점으로 재조명될 수 있다고 주장한다. 마지막으로 이러한 재평가를 위해 본고가 제시한 대안적 접근법을 기반으로 더욱 체계적이고 폭넓은 연구가 수반되어야 한다는 차후 과제를 남긴다.

주제어 : 봉쇄정책, 한국전쟁, 베트남전쟁, 신현실주의, 역사사회학, 경로의존성