

The Forever Containment

Emanuel Pietrobon



International Institute for Global Analyses

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Emanuel Pietrobon

University of Turin - Italy

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INTRODUCTION

Russia only has two allies: its army and its navy
(Alexander III)

The above-mentioned quote is the best way to start this analysis whose goal is to prove that Russia isn't merely dealing with a sanctions-regime but is confronting a worldwide Cold War-style containment which has been designed to prevent the country from re-emerging as a global leader. In this context, Russia can only count on itself and on a bunch of partners and must stop believing that a permanent normalization with the West is possible, because it isn't.

This analysis is closely linked to an article that we, Vision and Global Trends, have published some months ago. That article, entitled “The neverending anti-Iranian containment” [1], described and explained why – according to us – the United States and Iran are likely to be forever enemies, regardless of the regime in power in Teheran.

In the case of Russia the reason for the neverending containment can be found by having a look at the globe: the Russian Federation is the world-largest country, it is sparsely populated and it is resource-rich. The climate change is set to untap even more resources, which today are hidden under the ice, and to make the arable lands richer in terms of productivity. Napoleon Bonaparte was the first one to understand this reality, and Adolf Hitler, Halford Mackinder, and Karl Haushofer came to the same conclusion. Russia is verily fighting for its own existence.

THE TRUE ORIGINS OF THE CONTAINMENT

Iran and Russia share a similar story and destiny, and it was precisely the perennial feeling of encirclement by foreign powers willing to deprive them of their natural spheres of influence, and to subdue them by means of puppet governments, that pushed them to forge a close relationship in the last decade. The anti-Iranian and anti-Russian containment share also a common point: everything started in Europe, more precisely in the United Kingdom; the US simply inherited the British foreign policy since it understood the pivotal importance played by strategic goals such as the hegemony over the Heartland and the control of the Indo-Pacific's maritime choke points.

Some countries are victims of the so-called *resource curse*, others, like Iran and Russia, are victims of what can be dubbed the *curse of geography*. Speaking about Russia, the reason why it is being encircled by the Western powers since the late 18th century lies in its very geographical position: it is permanently extended over the Heartland and is home of some of the world-largest reserves of strategic natural resources, from metals to hydrocarbons.

Some could say that the containment emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War II and was masterminded by George Kennan and his *Long Telegram*, others may point out that the West-Russia were never very friendly as shown by the Great Game. In any case, the origins of the Western political Russophobia are to be retraced in the writings of British politicians and scholars dating back the 18th century. That's another proof that we're speaking of a deep-rooted attitude that it is unlikely to change in the next future.

During the Great Game, which lasted from 1830s to early 1900s, the British staged a hegemonic confrontation against the Russians for hegemony over Central Asia.

The British feared that Russian adventurism in Asia would end with the fall of the Persian and Ottoman empires in Moscow's sphere of influence, with inevitable repercussions on the control of the Indian subcontinent and, therefore, of the entire Far East.

At the same time, Russians feared that the British could use their influence on Muslim-majority lands to provoke anti-Russian uprisings throughout the empire and in Russian-friendly khanates. Does this latter point sound familiar? If not, it should: indeed, it is the modern-day policy followed by the US to make pressure over Russia's Near Abroad and within Russia itself.

Last but not least, it must be remembered that the Western powers didn't put aside their differences and rivalries to fight the "religious threat" posed by Ottoman Turkey but they did so to fight a Christian power, that is Russia. Between 1853 and 1856 the leading powers of the European order of States made an alliance in Crimea to fight together against Russia; this was probably the very starting point of what is now dubbed as the containment.

Accordingly, the inconvenient truth is that Russia and the West can cooperate to solve some issues of international relevance and they can be even friends for a while, but no long-lasting peace is possible between them as history shows very well.

In fact, the permanent imperial overextension of Russia is seen as a threat by the Western powers since the 18th century, namely when the tsars started an expansionist campaign toward Eastern Europe and Central Asia that eventually gave rise to what is historically called the Great Game and that lasted until the outbreak of World War I. After World War II, the British were replaced by the Americans and the new born Soviet Union had to face a harsh containment lasted until the end of Cold War.

A FOREVER CONTAINMENT?

In the aftermath of the USSR collapse, the West took advantage of Russia's moment of weakness, caused by the severe economic recession, social chaos, civil war-like climate, and secessionist spring in North Caucasus, and proceeded to incorporate gradually the Balkans and the former members of the Warsaw Pact into the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

This period, lasted from the early 1990s to the mid-2000s, can be called the *soft containment* since Moscow tried not to reply aggressively to the West's actions in its historic backyards and the EU-USA bloc joined the efforts with the Kremlin on the War on Terror. But starting from the 2010s, the West resumed the tough line, leading many experts to speak about *New Cold War* and *Cold War 2.0*, although it would be more correct to speak about *forever containment* or *endless containment* (*Бесконечное сдерживание*) because the West-backed anti-Russian agenda never really stopped and is likely to endure over time.

The reason of this belief can be found in the writings of geopolitics' godfathers Sir Halford Mackinder and Zbigniew Brzezinski. In short, the control over Eurasia, more in detail over the *Heartland*, is essential for the control over the world and so every hegemony-seeking global power should focus its efforts on preventing Eurasian great powers from emerging.

According to this school of thought, Russia, which is permanently extended over Europe, Central Asia and Eastern Asia, represents a constant threat and must be contained and territorially resized.

For the ensemble of these reasons, Russia should operate in international relations with the awareness that the hostility is based on barely-changeable factors and that, therefore, it is mandatory to develop a resistive economic system, less vulnerable to sanctions, price shocks, boycotts and other forms of economic war. This implies a deep re-thinking of its own global strategy: from the Old Continent to the Global South.

A MATTER OF HISTORICAL RECURRENCE

There are, at the present time, two great nations in the world which seem to tend towards the same end, although they started from different points: I allude to the Russians and the Americans. [...] All other nations seem to have nearly reached their natural limits, and only to be charged with the maintenance of their power; but these are still in the act of growth [...] these are proceeding with celerity along a path to which no the human eye can assign no term. The American struggles against the obstacles which nature opposes to him; the adversaries of the Russian are men. The former combats the wilderness and savage life; the latter, civilization with all its weapons and arts: the conquests of the one are therefore gained with the ploughshare; those of the other by the sword. The Anglo-American relies upon personal interest to accomplish his ends, and gives free scope to the unguided strength and common sense of the citizens; the Russian centres all the authority of society in a single arm. The principal instrument of the former is freedom; of the latter, servitude. Their starting-point is different, and their courses are not the same; yet each of them seems marked out by the will of Heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe.

(Alexis de Tocqueville)

Alexis de Tocqueville wrote those unfriendly words in 1835, long before the start of the Cold War and the rise of the first anti-Russian sentiments in the American establishment. Some decades later, in 1867, the US-Russia relations reached an all-time peak with the historic *Alaska purchase* (*Продажа Аляски*) [2]. Their destiny seemed already written but geopolitics knows no exceptions: some powers are natural-born rivals and their partnerships are nothing but temporary because they are merely anti-historic. The Alaska purchase itself must be read with hindsight for what it truly was: an attempt to oust Russia from North America, because although the American establishment publicly praised the czars, secretly it disliked them.

Many people don't know that the 2016 American presidential elections were a remake of those which took place in 1828. That year Andrew Jackson was running against the incumbent John Quincy Adams and the latter became victim of a dirty character assassination campaign very similar to the one that hit and damaged Donald Trump's image. The mainstream media published baseless rumours and fake news depicting Adams as “the Czar's pimp” and as a foreign-serving double agent – among the other things – to destroy his public image and his reputation.

The forgotten story of the so-called “Coffin Handbills”, the fake news campaign that enabled Jackson to win the elections, does resemble a lot with what occurred in 2016 – with Trump accused of being “Putin's puppet” – and it tells us a lot about the Russo-American relations. Tocqueville, who probably knew all these facts, showed an incredible farsightedness since he understood that sooner or later the two powers would clash in light of their inherent differences.

It's unquestionable that Russia keeps being considered in evil terms in the eyes of the West, while the US is considered the leader of the free world; leading-countries of different and barely compatible systems of values and world-visions. In 2020 like 1828 and 1853 nothing has changed and this is the reason why we should speak of forever containment instead of neo-containment.

More than one century after the publication of Democracy in America, in 1946 the Moscow-based American diplomat George Kennan wrote the famous “Long Telegram” in which he warned his country of the danger coming from the Soviet Union, which for reasons both ideological, namely the purpose to spread the Communist revolutionary values all over the world, and cultural, namely the long-standing tradition of Russian expansionism, was to be considered the West's next threat.

That document marked the birth of the containment doctrine. Since that moment, the US gathered the legacy of Sir Halford Mackinder and replaced the declining United Kingdom by entering the Great Game in order to extend its hegemony over the Heartland. These events prove that it's not only about geopolitics, it's about geo-philosophy, namely the eternal return, historical recurrence.

BRZEZINSKI'S SHADOW

More than one hundred years have passed from the publication of Mackinder's *The Geographical Pivot of History* and more than 20 years from Zbigniew Brzezinski's *The Grand Chessboard*, and the anti-Russian containment keeps being a top-priority for the US despite the end of the Cold War.

Brzezinski, the pioneer of the so-called “geopolitics of faith” during the Reagan era, left some suggestions for posterity with the aim of exploiting the fall of the Soviet Union so that to extend the containment until Russian borders through:

1. Expansion of the NATO and the EU in the Balkans and in Central & Eastern Europe, namely the incorporation of the former Communist world. Today, only Belarus, Moldova and Serbia keep being under Russian influence but we don't for how long.
2. Turning Ukraine away from Russia's sphere of influence – a very important goal, considering that without it “Russia ceases to be a Eurasian empire”.
3. Pressure over Caucasus and the –stan countries.

The events that have taken place in the last twenty years prove that Brzezinski's Eurasian strategy is the leitmotif of the US' foreign agenda for Russia and the domestic issues faced by the Kremlin in the post-Soviet era have played a fundamental role in strengthening the neverending containment and making the country more encircled than ever.

Brzezinski's last advice came true in 2014: in Ukraine took place a controversial color revolution allegedly backed by the US and the EU which obliged the then-president Viktor Fedorovyč Janukovyč to leave the country, bringing to power a new elite which is basically anti-Russian and is interested in joining the EU and NATO.

In the aftermath of the revolution, Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula and it allegedly sponsored a low-intensity conflict in the Russian-majority Donbass to keep the country in a stalemate and hinder the Western plans. As a retaliation, the West implemented a series of economic and noneconomic sanctions against Russia aiming at affecting the perspectives of economic growth and the development of strategic sectors in the long-run.

CONCLUSIONS

Against the background of the sanctions regime, the Trump administration started a scorched earth policy against Russia's strategic partners in Latin America, namely Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela, and in Asia, namely Iran and People's Republic of China, and it followed a Reagan-like maximum pressure campaign based on higher military expenditure, deployment of further troops in the eastern borders of NATO, and even a new space race. The EU, instead, increased the pressure over Belarus with the goal of a regime change and it joined enthusiastically the prospect of a decoupling from Russian via energy diversification and the build-up of alternative corridors, like the Three Seas Initiative and the E40.

In such highly conflictual scenario, Russia must learn from the past mistakes and not taking part in costly power-pursuing races, because the US' ultimate goal is to reduce drastically Russia's range of action all over the world. Indeed, we are witnessing the pipeline wars, the unfair competition in the arms and oil & gas industries, and in the next years the conflict will expand to the nuclear energy, one of Moscow's most preferred tools of its energy diplomacy in the developing world, and to the remaining backyards: Belarus, Serbia, Moldova and the –stan countries.

Each of these geopolitical theatres is increasingly targeted by the Western attention or by Turkey's and the signals of a likely split are pretty visible. As to this regard, it's emblematic that the Kremlin didn't get to convince Uzbekistan to join the EAEU after years-long talks, gaining only its entry as an observer member, whereas the entry into Ankara-run Turkic Council was formalized in less than two months. It must be stressed that more economic cooperation and dialogue with Tashkent is needed because Brzezinski devoted much attention to this country in his chess game, since he believed it was the Central Asian country least vulnerable to Moscow's influence.

Unsurprisingly, both the US and its regional allies, from Turkey to the Gulf oil-monarchies, are betting hard on Uzbekistan, and the pan-Turkic and Islamic revival which is taking place within its borders will work to the Kremlin's detriment. Two interrelated solutions are to be implemented: a) the use of Russian-friendly Muslim countries to counter the malicious influence of American allies over the faithful and the public opinion, b) the resort to culture, media and educational entities to keep spreading Russian-friendly feelings and attitudes.

Lastly, the Turn to the East and to Africa must not be abandoned or overlooked in the next future, that is once the sanctions-regime will be over, because Russia's future lies in the developing world. Indeed, the EU is more and more decoupled from Russia and growingly reliant on itself or on the US and, furthermore, its Russian-unfriendly attitude is not going to change significantly. It's a forever containment by a timeless rival.

Notes

1. Pietrobon Emanuel, [*The neverending anti-Iranian containment*](#), Vision & Global Trends, 18/05/2019
2. Pietrobon Emanuel, [*Lessons of geopolitics from the Alaska Purchase*](#), Vision & Global Trends, 11/03/2019