



POINTS OF VIEW

The International Studies Center (ISC) publishes commentaries on international issues in its Points of View. The views expressed are the authors' own and do not represent those of the Royal Thai Government or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Thailand. Permission to reproduce the commentary(s) may be obtained from the ISC at isc@mfa.mail.go.th, and due recognition to the author(s) should also be given as appropriate.

No. 9/2023 | December 2023

The Wisdom of Détente in American Foreign Policy

Prapee Apichatsakol¹

I want to pay tribute to Henry Kissinger, whose U.S. foreign policy has left an indelible mark on the course of history. Myself, I am a lecturer and have taught American Foreign policy for many years. Like many professors, I always assign Henry Kissinger's books as must-read materials for my students, from his books such as "American foreign policy: the three essays", "Diplomacy, and "World Order" etc., which have been very widely read by scholars, international relations students and diplomats. Even though Kissinger's foreign policy is often criticised, what he did was not that controversial in the context of U.S. national interests at that time; this thinking comes from the cold war era, his policy must be considered a classic of all time, and actually might adapt well to today's global politics.

In this article, I would like to pick up on Kissinger's policies during the "Détente" period. This is a well-used diplomatic term that actually started long before people came to widely

¹ Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Law Program, Srinakharinwirot University and Vice President of American Studies Association in Thailand (ASAT)

understand it as they do today. During the cold war period, “Détente” referred to the reduction of tension, and to the diplomacy between the Soviet Union and the United States from the late 1960s to the late 1970s. Some of Henry Kissinger’s greatest achievements included his encouragement of the opening of the relationship between U.S. and the government of China, and his role in negotiating the end of the Vietnam War.

Before the “Détente” period, a policy of containment was the main strategy of American foreign policy, and was intended to halt the expansion of Soviet communism, and political and military influence. Containment policy may have worked for a time with the United States to protect their national interests, and to curtail the spread of communism, but it pushed the U.S. into many major wars worldwide, such as the Vietnam War, the Korean War, and other conflicts.

Since the 2019 U.S.-China trade war, many international affairs scholars and experts worldwide had Déjà Vu; they felt that they had experienced this situation already in the past cold war, but now between U.S. and China. The relationship today between the two countries seems like it could be a new cold war, but if we consider this, now the context is different. China has been the fastest growing economy over the past few decades, accelerating from the 2000s. U.S. has been increasingly concerned that China’s economic power is a major challenge, and an intolerable threat to U.S. vital interests, and also with security concerns, especially with China’s involvement in issues like the South China Sea and Taiwan.

Because of China’s growing influence in Asia and beyond, we saw the return of U.S. diplomat George F. Kennan’s containment policy in 21st century American foreign policy, “Pivot to Asia” (the policy of strategic rebalancing toward Asia). This is one example of a re-emerging containment policy that was announced in 2011 by the Obama administration to increase focus on the Asia Pacific region. This was a key strategy to engage with economic, diplomatic and security

ties within this region. The U.S. supported a mega-trade agreement called “Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)” which was negotiated between 12 Pacific Rim countries, excluding China. This demonstrates one kind of containment through trade.

To limit China’s influence, this was a containment policy that responded to the challenge from the rise of China and its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), passed from Barack Obama to Donald Trump, but it took a different form. Trump’s foreign policy revealed a more commercial perspective to best suit American interests. In 2018, Donald Trump launched a trade war against China with large tariffs on Chinese goods intended to stop China’s unfair trade practices and accused China of theft of American intellectual property.

Another strategy to counter China’s influence, Donald Trump’s revival of Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue) seemed like pivot to Asia in his own style. U.S., Japan, India, and Australia all shared mutual concern about the aggression and rise of China. Along with the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy” of the Trump’s administration, the objective of U.S. here was a further strategy of direct competition with China. This is a framework that includes countering China’s economic aggression, such as the Belt and Road Initiative which is intended to expand trade and investment around the world.

Under the Trump’s administration, the battleground of US and China moved from a trade war to include a technology war, thus their confrontation intensified. At that time the relationship between the two countries heated up, and the atmosphere deteriorated greatly.

Next, the Biden’s Administration reversed some of Donald Trump’s foreign policy, but similarly, Biden continued to pursue a containment policy against China, although this is different and on another level; an upgraded version. From the beginning, he brought back democratic values into his foreign policy as an “ideology competition” in order to push an autocracy such as China

away. Under the Biden's administration, the Indo-Pacific Strategy focuses on rules-based order. For example, the U.S. now pressures China using transparency and international law in the case of the South China Sea. Biden's new Indo-Pacific Strategy also deters China through QUAD and AUKUS (a military alliance and strategic co-operation between Australia U.K. and U.S.). Between then and now, it seems that the U.S. and China are still in a toxic relationship; this might lead to a return of bloc politics and distrust of each other.

Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping have had onsite and online meetings on several occasions; their warm greetings and beautiful smiles make the world feel at ease, even though these moments cannot compare with the time Richard Nixon met Mao Zedong in 1972, for that visit meant a very large leap of distance to cover. Today, the meetings of Biden and Xi should help de-escalate tension in some way and look positive in the media. But in reality, with the difficult issues of today and challenges in a whole new modern context, the U.S. and China's foreign policies may not have had big changes so far, because they need to safeguard their national interests. In the end, would these media events just become lip service?

All the above-mentioned new versions of U.S. containment strategies are risky policy that may create a tense competitive situation, and might possibly take us down the road to war, and a serious concern to the world. So, in the spirit of Kissinger, the U.S. should walk the Détente line with China, just like he did when he pursued his policy of Détente with the Soviet Union through the 1970s.

In Kissinger's 2022 interview with the Financial Times, he commented about Russian invasion of Ukraine: "We are now living in a totally new era". Thus, to re-approach China should be the main idea, but the solution would not be just to rewind the clock. With two very different cultures, two ideological and political systems, we cannot persuade China to change its behaviour,

but rather, the first priority should be to rebuild trust. The heart of any successful relationship is to respect and understand one another. Competition between these two countries is inevitable and may continue, but U.S. foreign policy should shift to have a more constructive engagement, to balance between competition and co-operation where both countries could work together within shared mutual benefits.

Major global challenges of the future will be not only security or economy. In today's complicated era, there are still many opportunities for U.S and China's co-operation to make peace by creating a global community for our shared future, with issues such as clean energy, innovation and climate change.

This resembles a fine saying of Kissinger's from his book, "On China": *"Relations between China and the United States need not - and should not - become a zero-sum game Consensus may prove difficult, but confrontation on these issues is self-defeating"*.