

Though facing complex challenges, America's foreign policy strategy must remain a continual work in progress.

*America today faces a number of complex foreign policy challenges, with few obvious routes towards their successful resolution. In light of this complexity, many may yearn for the clarity of the Cold War, but **Daniel J. Sargent** warns against this. He writes that the Cold War policy of containment was no roadmap for policy, and that within its relatively loose outlook policymakers improvised and adapted, and pursued diverse agendas. In contemporary foreign policy, strategists must also acknowledge the potential need to change quickly, and the validity of alternative perspectives on the world.*



In January, on Capitol Hill, a tedious slur on Henry Kissinger (“war criminal”) provoked an irate reaction (“low-life scum”). The clash between Senator McCain and the protesters of Code Pink garnered media coverage and YouTube clicks. The Senate’s hearings on national strategy not so much. This is unfortunate. For world-weary superpowers, opportunities for sustained strategic reflection are rare. The transfer of power in the Senate affords such an occasion, and John McCain has seized it. His committee hearings nonetheless illustrate both the many challenges facing American foreign policy and the limits of strategy as a guide to foreign-policy choice.

Making strategy is intellectual work. The strategist seeks to explain the patterns of world events, hopeful that comprehension will guide policy and permit policymakers to shape global trends. Requiring interpretation, making strategy is akin to writing history, but what the strategist explains is the present and future. Henry Kissinger once put it thus: “I think of myself as a historian... I have tried to understand the forces that are at work in this period.”

During the Cold War, the forces at work were clear — or so it now appears. The world was divided, and the United States stood for freedom and against the Soviet Union. Washington did not push the USSR too hard, for doing so risked war. Instead, policymakers adhered to a strategy of containment, the logic of which presumed that the USSR would crumble upon its inner contradictions. History vindicated this theory, and many now yearn for the coherence that containment presumably imparted to US foreign policy. The Cold War was dangerous, General Brent Scowcroft told the McCain hearings, but at least “we knew what the strategy was.”

Americans should not yearn for such clarity. Containment nostalgia distorts the actual adaptability of US foreign policy in the Cold War. The search for strategic coherence is, moreover, inappropriate to the needs of US foreign policy today, which requires not intellectual cohesion but tolerance for complexity, improvisation, and even contradiction.



President Ford meets in the Oval Office with Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger and Vice President Nelson A. Rockefeller to discuss the American evacuation of Saigon, Oval Office, White House, Washington DC.. 1975 Credit: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Consider Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski — two of the sages who addressed McCain's committee. They rank among America's clearest strategic thinkers, but neither was in his own time a strategic dogmatist. Henry Kissinger began as an adept practitioner of Cold War geopolitics, but as new challenges mounted, he pirouetted to champion cooperation on issues, like energy, that had little to do with the Cold War. From these efforts, the International Energy Agency and the G-7 were born.

Brzezinski, with President Carter, worked to build a "framework of international cooperation" for a world that the Cold War no longer defined and brought human rights into the foreign-policy mainstream. Only as US-Soviet relations deteriorated in the late 1970s did the Carter administration adopt an invigorated anti-Soviet policy. Pragmatic adaptation to events, not devotion to strategic coherence, enabled policymakers to lead the United States through one of the hardest phases in its superpower career, prefiguring the Cold War's resolution on American terms.

America today faces complex and discordant challenges. For John McCain, a revanchist Russia, a rising China, a truculent Iran, an implacable Islamism, and a rash of failing states make the world more dangerous than ever. McCain might have included (as Scowcroft did) global climate change, an existential challenge for industrial civilization. It is seductive to presume that a singular strategy could enable the United States to transcend, resolve, and master the myriad challenges it faces.

The hope is forlorn. Containment during the Cold War provided no roadmap for policy. At most, containment enjoined acceptance of the world's division and optimism in the West's prospects. Within this loose outlook, policymakers improvised and adapted, pursuing diverse agendas. The most effective, like Kissinger, understood that even superpowers do not determine the course of world events; instead, their leaders must react and respond. Presuming the reverse risks the kind of strategic hubris that embroiled the United States in the quagmire that President Obama has struggled for six years to resolve.

What role then for strategy? Strategic thinking, which weighs costs and benefits and contemplates long-range consequences, is a prerequisite for responsible foreign policy. Yet Americans should beware the notion that world affairs can be comprehended within coherent, meta-historical frameworks: the Cold War, globalization, the clash of civilizations, and so on. To be creative, strategy must acknowledge both the provisionality of its own conclusions and the validity of alternative perspectives on the world. Like history, it must remain a work in continual progress.

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