The costs of containing China

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Washington's policymakers at last understand that China is a serious strategic rival. For the first time since the Soviet collapse, they recognise that a major country is trying to expand its power and influence at the expense of US global leadership.

Now they must decide what, if anything, to do about it. Vice President Mike Pence spoke for many in October 2018 when he struck a defiant tone, committing the United States to resist China's ambitions and contain its challenge. Inevitably people started to talk of a new Cold War with China. But containing China is not going to be easy, and no one has yet explained how this new Cold War is going to be prosecuted, what it will cost and why the United States must do it.

Optimists in Washington probably think that President Donald Trump's trade war with China will blunt Beijing's strategic challenge by undermining its economic and technological progress, and perhaps disrupt its politics. It won't be that easy. China faces a rocky economic path but its huge economy will not vanish. Xi Jinping may well face rising opposition, but that can't be relied upon to solve the United States' problem either.

The only prudent assessments are that China will remain by far the most economically formidable adversary the United States has ever faced, that its determination to reassert its great power status goes well beyond Xi, and that nothing will harden China's resolve more than a conviction that the United States is trying to stop China's rise.

Nor will the United States find it easy to sign up allies for a new Cold War against China. No one wants to live under China's shadow, but no one wants to risk the economic costs and strategic risks of a rupture with Beijing — especially when they are unsure of the United States' real intentions and resolve.

So the new Cold War with China will play out primarily as a bilateral military contest. The two sides will not necessarily go to war, but each side's capacity to convince the other that they are willing to go to war will determine which of them prevails. We have already seen some classic brinkmanship in the South China Sea. But the real test may well come over Taiwan, and the escalating rhetoric of 2018 makes it more likely that this test will come sooner rather than later.

Most Americans take it for granted that the United States can and would go to war with China if it attacked Taiwan. But they may not realise what that would mean and how it might end. As China's air and naval forces have grown, the United States has lost the capacity to secure a swift and sure victory in a conventional war with China in the Western Pacific.

This means that, to a much greater degree than is commonly realised, US confidence in winning a war with China depends on nuclear forces. The United States would rely on the threat of using nuclear weapons first to make up for its inability to win a conventional war on its rival's doorstep. The hope is that this threat would be enough to make China back off.

But this threat is only credible if it is clear that China would not retaliate by launching nuclear attacks on the United States, or if it is clear that the United States is willing to accept such attacks in order to prevail. At present US policy assumes that China would not retaliate. The reasoning is that Beijing would be deterred from retaliatory attacks on US soil by fear of a much more devastating US counter-retaliation.

Perhaps this is right, but it is far from certain. How sure could a US president be that China would not retaliate, even if that did mean a massive US counterstrike? And how far might that uncertainty embolden China to defy US threats to use nuclear weapons first?

This is why Washington's threat to use nuclear weapons first is only credible to the extent that the United States is clearly willing to accept a nuclear attack on its own soil. This was how things worked in the old Cold War. But is containing China as important to the United States as containing the Soviet Union was?

The Americans saw the Soviets as posing an existential threat because its universalist ideology and apparent capacity to dominate the whole of Eurasia made it seem like a direct threat to America itself. It only makes sense for the United States to accept the kinds of risks it accepted in the old Cold War if it is likely that China might pose a similar threat to the United States in the future. No one has yet argued convincingly that it does.

What China does unquestionably threaten is America's place as the dominant power in Asia and its claims to leadership of the global order. But how important are these things to Americans today? They don't seem to matter much to Donald Trump and his supporters, and perhaps not to many Democrats either. Can they be convinced that the costs and risks of opposing China in Asia are worth it?

So those who want Washington to take Beijing on have a big job in the year ahead to explain why containing China matters as much to US security as containing the Soviet Union did. Without this explanation the United States

cannot formulate a credible strategy against China. And without a credible strategy, Pence's bold words will soon look like empty braggadocio and US leadership in Asia will slide swiftly into history.

No one outside China should want that to happen, but we'd be foolish not to see how likely it is nonetheless.

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This article is part of an EAF special feature series on 2018 in review and the year ahead.