

**NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF POLITICAL STUDIES
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**Summary
DOCTORAL THESIS**

**U.S. - China Strategic Competition in the Indo-Pacific at the Beginning
of the 21st Century: The Evolution of the Containment Concept**

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Thesis Summary

Beginning from the 2011 Rebalance to Asia policy, followed by the Indo-Pacific strategies of the Trump and Biden administrations, the American foreign policy priority has pivoted from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific region, marking the strategic repositioning of the United States in the face of China's accelerated economic and military rise. A number of international relations experts have expressed their views on the emergence of a subtle containment strategy, focused on the economic and military rise of the P.R.C. and intended to counterbalance China's regional dominance, framing the prioritization of American foreign policy towards the Indo-Pacific in the context of the return to great power politics and the competition for primacy in the region. Other analysts spoke out in favor of the crystallization of orientations in American regional policy that were reminiscent of the containment phenomenon during the Cold War, while several sources indicated the end of the George W. Bush Administration as the moment when the United States initiated a dual approach towards China, continuing the general policy of diplomatic and economic engagement carried out by the previous Clinton Administration, but, at the same time, starting to consolidate alliances and military partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region in order to face the potential Chinese regional rise, manifestations indicating a shift in the regional American approach in its approach to the Indo-Pacific region.

The thesis aims, as a core objective, to identify whether, starting with the redirection of the American foreign policy priority in 2011, the existence of a relevant, organized containment policy with regard to China is observed or not, the study aiming to constitute a contribution to the theorization of containment, analyzing the traditional variants of containment from the Cold War period, but also to the recent debate on the containment hypothesis. The objective of the research had as a starting point the positioning of renowned analysts and political scientists from around the world, regarding a the emergence of a containment-like phenomenon in the Indo-Pacific centered on China, in the context of the strategic competition between the United States and China, as a response to the Chinese economic and military rise in the last two decades, a narrative that has intensified in the recent academic debate regarding the general framework of the policies concerning the pivoting American geopolitical interest towards the Indo-Pacific.

In order to achieve the objective of identifying to what extent recent American foreign policy aimed at containment in the Indo-Pacific space, the research focuses on analyzing the objectives and the main elements of the American Rebalance to Asia from 2011, Free and Open

Indo-Pacific from 2017 and Indo-Pacific Strategy from 2022, corroborated with relevant annual reports on the U.S. security and defense strategies and other official documents reflecting the objectives of such. In order to discuss the extent to which they reflect a containment model, the thesis refers extensively to the mechanisms of classical containment during the Cold War, analyzing its dimensions and manifestations and questioning those aspects capable of transcending time. The study will then analyze the regional policy guidelines after 2010 of the three aforementioned administrations regarding the Indo-Pacific region, in order to help formulate conclusions regarding the presence or absence of such elements in a combined manner, able to correspond to the pursuit of a containment goal. The relevance of such elements, placed in a regional context of analysis, will lead to the grouping of arguments, favorable or against the emergence of a coherent and intentional policy of containment of the United States with addressability towards China, which, as a result of the manifestation of Chinese geopolitical aspirations to project its power and influence in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, are likely to produce shifts in the distribution of power and to lead to global order alterations and modified polarity in the international system. Regarding this last aspect, the formulation of conclusions regarding the research results starts from the premise that the current international system is transiently in a post-unipolar paradigm.

The first chapter of the thesis is dedicated to the design of the research and exploration of the theoretical framework in which it is inscribed, followed in the second chapter by a historical analysis of the American containment policy during the Cold War, intended to reveal the main components of the containment concept, used by the various American administrations of the respective period and the examination of its recurrent mechanisms, in order to subsequently offer an interpretation on the transferability and relevance of such in the case of a supposed containment policy regarding China, which overrides the terms of the Sino-American geopolitical competition, viewed through a neorealist filter.

The study is not however purely analytical, that is, it is not limited to identifying the characteristic elements of the containment and to the interaction between them for at least two reasons: one is of theoretical nature, namely the danger of obtaining reductionist results in the research carried out compared to the complexity of the theoretical debate that generated this research theme, and another is related to the partial access to recent geopolitical realities compared to the numerous historical sources regarding the political directives that shaped the damming in the second half of the 20th century, the realities of the last two decades often being carried out by institutions and political decision-makers outside the sphere of public information. Thus, the study documented the features of classical containment in a secondary

plan, the main approach being the observation, analysis, data aggregation and the achievement of an argumentative contribution based on the concept of containment, capable of answering the proposed research questions in a manner that adds to the vast range of interpretations regarding the Sino-American strategic competition in recent years. The third chapter analyzes the multidimensional structure of containment during the Cold War, as it did not manifest itself linearly or monolithically, but initially starting as a strategy and becoming, through subsequent additions and alterations, a true doctrine. The concept evolved over time as a comprehensive policy, which maintained relative coherence throughout successive administrations, being carried out on multiple levels (political, economic, military, diplomatic, technological and ideological), often influencing each other, through which the instrumentation of foreign policy directives was achieved, especially regarding the U.S.S.R. and the states in its sphere of influence. As a result, its efficiency did not consist only in measures based on the military force of the U.S. and its allies, but rather was due to the synergistic effects among its various dimensions, each reinforcing or amplifying the others. The study will use these features to structure the multiple dimensions of classical containment and also in order to analyze the transformations undergone by the concept in its application as a regional policy within the policy of “dual containment”, a variety of the concept from the early 1990s. Chapter four constitutes the author’s original contribution, materialized by analyzing the coordinates of American regional policies from 2011-2024 addressed to the Indo-Pacific area, investigating in detail the arguments that built up the containment hypothesis in the political discourse and in the interpretations of experts and also the arguments contradicting such hypothesis, to which I add my recorded understanding of the phenomenon debated regarding the emergence of containment that I subsequently include in a geopolitical context. The last chapter will attempt to index the research results, applying them in the context of the dynamics in the South China Sea, as case study, in order to formulate conclusions at the end of the work.

Going through the historiography of containment during the Cold War, an age when it represented the background of the American foreign policy’s coordinates, the thesis presents the three main American schools of thought that addressed the topics of the Cold War and to the role of containment incorporated in it, which shaped not only the academic discourse, but also resonated in political debates and in the American public perception, influencing the foreign policy strategies of the United States over time, subsequently the research focusing on the theoretical basis used to build up the arguments - based on George Kennan's doctrinal perspective on containment - can provide coherence from a historical perspective to the

answers regarding its characteristics. A neorealist theoretical background of the offensive realism perspective of Professor John Mearsheimer was added to the study, allowing the containment arguments to be analyzed in the context of great powers strategic competition, revealing the military dynamics and the multidimensional geopolitical approach to the rivalry between the US and China, especially in terms of preventing a new regional hegemony, vis-à-vis China's ambitions to become a dominant power in Asia and beyond (the BRI project, for example, being recognized for its obvious geopolitical value, alongside its economic dimension). The choice of theoretical basis offers mutual complementarity to the two theoretical perspectives, being able to provide a comprehensive picture of the geopolitical, military, economic, technological and ideological dimensions of the US-China competition, either in the sense of identifying a potential containment policy addressed to the Chinese rise or the opposite, meaning the absence of such policy. The said theories were chosen for their potential that allows extensive analysis in the research domain through the lens of great power politics, in the context of the ongoing strategic competition between the United States and China: Kennan's realist geopolitical theory directly linking geographical elements (land and sea territories, location, resources) with strategic outcomes, influencing political directives in the formation of foreign policy strategies in order to optimize power projection and John Mearsheimer's neorealism, on the other hand, - although less focused on geography *per se*, - explains how great powers use advantages and alliances to maximize security in an anarchic system of sovereign states, highlighting how geographical positioning and control over key regions can facilitate a state's rise to regional hegemony.

The research paper presents a historical and analytical research approach in the area of the qualitative research method, supported by the historical descriptive method, materialized through the analysis of primary sources (official public or declassified documents issued by the American executive or military authorities), the analysis of secondary specialized literature (volumes of works, academic articles, memoirs, journals, other archival documents), the analysis of discourse and statements of American officials or executive or governmental authorities from various interested states of the Indo-Pacific region, in addition to the data collected from political commentaries or interviews, available in online or transcribed video versions of theorists and politicians relevant to the research field, as well as various media sources (newspapers, magazines and other reference publications). A set of quantitative data intended to answer the research questions regarding the evolution of the American and Chinese military-industrial complexes completes the research, as well as statistics regarding economic instruments used in the analyzed American policies. The methodology is complemented by the

semi-structured individual interview method, which was used to narrow down the broad field of research represented by the containment doctrine, - a very extensive phenomenon from the geographic point of view (under the conditions of a global bipolarity and an isolated non-alignment movement with regional accents during the Cold War) and temporal one (over four decades).

The research includes an extensive analysis regarding the origin of the containment concept, the evolution and transformations of the containment policies of successive American administrations during the Cold War, in consideration of the alterations of the initial concept throughout the implementation of various containment strategies, which represented periodic reassessments of the balance between deterring the Soviet adversary and defending the United States and its allies, and also investigates their mechanisms and main instruments, structuring them according to the identified dimensions that encompassed the manifestations of containment: economic, military, diplomatic, technological, notably the ideological dimension, which constituted the central element of the containment doctrine, while also representing the public discursive support for the operationalization of the other components of containment.

The in-depth analysis of the three American strategies is focused on the Indo-Pacific region starting with 2010, in order to observe the ways of instrumentalizing the objectives of the U.S. foreign policy strategy, within the US geopolitical device in the Western Pacific region, mainly those oriented towards China. Evaluating the arguments regarding containment within these three administrations, the analysis also interrogates the effectiveness of containment in an economically globalized world going through an accelerated process towards multipolarity, examining whether it can be a viable model for managing the complexity of relations between the US and China's great powers in the 21st century.

The American pivot strategy begun in 2011 was a response to the trend of global power shifting towards Asia-Pacific, resulting from the constant growth of China's regional influence and its increasing assertiveness in asserting a dominant role in the Indo-Pacific space. After 2014, the year when Russia invaded Crimea, American officials began to pay special attention to the revanchist discourse in Russia and China's slide towards nationalism at home, the tightening of diplomatic language ("warrior wolf") and actions on its territorial neighbors. The Rebalancing Policy has known a diversity of interpretations, centered on either the realist or the liberal perspective as, although it establishes political and military objectives, it also reflects the American need for commercial and economic cooperation with the states of East Asia and, in particular, with the P.R. China. Thus, the opinions of theorists in the field of International Relations have varied significantly, from framing the respective strategy in the context of a

bilateral Sino-American relationship of engagement, - which was previously considered to have reached its peak during the term of President Clinton – or to comments suggesting that the Pivot was designed to contain China coming mainly from experts from the Asian space, especially Chinese ones. American political scientist Joseph Nye believes that the Pivot's strategy was marked by the return of great powers competition amid a decline of the engagement policy with China, assessing that the engagement policy effectively died by 2016.

From its debut in 2017, the Trump Administration has centered its foreign policy on the strategic competition with China: against the backdrop of the accelerated economic, technological and military evolution of the P.R.C., the directives declared in the American foreign policy during its term have highlighted the placement of the U.S.-China competition in a regional and systemic context through the American Free and Open Indo-Pacific strategy and through national security strategies. The objectives and terms of these directives, relevant in describing the sino-american relations in terms of great power competition, identifying China as a "revisionist power" that aims to modify the regional order to its benefit, have been considered the grounds for an emerging containment policy oriented towards China. However, the interpretation must take into account the protectionist nature of the economic measures dictated by the nationalist doctrine of "America First", in order to avoid confusion between mere protectionist objectives and an alleged economic containment.

During the term of Biden Administration, an increased frequency of opinions was recorded regarding the existence of a concerted containment policy, in part due to a number of directives belonging to the Indo-Pacific strategy of the previous administration that have been maintained in the 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, but also due to the emergence of the "Democracy vs. Autocracy" plea, articulated at the Summit for Democracy in December 2021, considered by analysts as an attempt to convince and mobilize democracies around the world to contain China, which seemed to give an ideological context to the US-China strategic competition. However, at the end of Biden Administration, most experts agreed that the plea was too diffuse ideologically and ultimately constituted a Manichaean contest between two camps, which created numerous diplomatic confusions, as it was not possible to delimit the countries that qualified for inclusion in the stated categories.

The case study aimed to critically assess whether the U.S. strategic behavior in the South China Sea between 2010 and 2024 reflects a containment policy directed towards China, the study aiming to distinguish if the dynamics of the area reflects containment, viewed as a coherent and deliberate strategic policy or an incidental result of the competition between the great powers or if it represents a rhetorical tool, by analyzing (i) the operational manifestations

and objectives of the Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOP), within the U.S. military posture in the South China Sea, (ii) the official U.S. foreign policy documents, to determine whether they indicate or support a containment strategy, (iii) examining the official Chinese narrative that presents the U.S. actions as a containment, also taking into account the arguments on which China bases its maritime territorial expansion and attempts to assert national law to justify the international attitude towards the South China Sea. South, (iv) assessing the legal and normative dimensions of U.S.'s maritime strategy in the South China Sea and the broader Indo-Pacific, and (v) exploring how strategic rivalry manifests itself in the absence of containment in a neorealist framework, given the real background of great power competition in which Sino-U.S. relations unfold, in order to test whether the American behavior represents a competitive balance, rather than a coordinated attempt to limit China's rise. Through these objectives, the study proposes a clearer, empirically and conceptually grounded understanding of U.S.'s strategic behavior in the South China Sea.

The results obtained within the research project are brought together in the final conclusions (while partial conclusions are recorded at the end of the chapters) and provide the answers identified by the author to the research questions, in consideration of the effort of the United States to maximize its power in the Indo-Pacific region and the tendency to balance China, within a strategic competition. The apparent aim does not seem to be directed towards limiting the Chinese development as a regional power, but to provide a preventive strategic response, meant to reduce the threat represented by the aggregation of power necessary for the rising rival to achieve hegemony in Asia, especially with regard to the economic dimension of an Asian domination, without having emerged a concrete model likely to highlight a coherent and continuous containment policy in its classical coordinates presenting similarities with the one carried out during the Cold War. However, as an inherent result of the strategic competition between the two great powers, the presence of specific containment mechanisms is noticeable, which could be integrated into a much more complex and less ideological contemporary policy than the containment of the Cold War era, which is why the manifestations of these mechanisms have a derivative character compared to the original mechanisms, targeted at areas of vital interest for the U.S., which denotes efforts on its part on the one hand to maintain engagement with China on levels of common interest, and on the other hand, to control the structural rise of its potential competitor, China, within the anarchic international system, before it reaches sufficient economic and military power to challenge the existing order and its normative rules.

The relevance of the research is given, on the one hand, by the significance of a possible emergence of a containment policy in international relations, including for the hypothesis of

resetting polarity in the international system, in the context in which more and more experts anticipate the transition to multipolarity or bipolarity, likely to coagulate the conditions of a new Cold War. On the other hand, the identification of relevant arguments against the containment hypothesis or the observations made regarding the mechanisms and dimensions of containment can help theorize the concept of containment and could serve in the future to confirm or refute the hypothesis of the use of similar phenomena by states other than the United States with aspirations of regional "great powers", as currently the narrative of a "containment" of India by China is gaining momentum.

Regarding the future research, in this author's opinion it requires continuation for a long duration in time, in order to be integrated at a later date into a much broader temporal perspective, which would allow access to the effective study of the strategies used in the Sino-American competition since the beginning of this century, which could highlight contact points between the model offered by the traditional containment strategies and the strategies contained in the three regional policies affirmed since 2010, able to place in a broad, systemic and clarified context the real objectives of the parties, which are to be revealed in the following years of the current new geopolitical era, which began upon the overcoming of the post-Cold War era that ended in 2022, as per the American perspective.

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