

## Analysis

### Dealing with Russia

#### 70 years after the Kennan telegram

Willem van Eekelen

**In February 1946 the State Department, at the request of the Treasury Department, asked the US Embassy in Moscow to explain the ‘incomprehensible Soviet unwillingness’ to adhere to the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Ambassador Averell Harriman already had left and the Deputy Chief of Mission, George Kennan, replied with the longest telegram in history, some 19 pages. A single brief message would, he felt, be a dangerous degree of over-simplification. Kennan had already tendered his resignation in frustration over much incomprehension in Washington, but had to wait until the new ambassador would arrive. The telegram gave him, as No. 2, the unusual opportunity to summarise his experience of two postings in Moscow. He used it to explain the background and main features of the Soviet post-war outlook and their projection not only on official policy but also on policy implemented through ‘front’ organisations and stooges of all sorts.**

The telegram made Kennan famous for his advocacy of a containment policy which would primarily focus on political and economic issues, and much less on military aspects.<sup>1</sup> The telegram itself remained classified for a long time, but in a 1947 *Foreign Affairs* article under the title “The Sources of Soviet Conduct”, signed as Mr. X, Kennan was able to make his views public, albeit anonymously. His argument was that long-term peace between the capitalist West and communist Russia was impossible, owing to the mixture of traditional Russian neurotic insecurity, Stalin’s need for an external enemy and a Soviet version of Russian messianism. Moscow would seek the collapse of capitalism not by armed attack, but by a mixture of bullying and subversion, making use of communist sympathizers in the West. The correct response would be a long-term containment of Soviet aggressive tendencies through the “adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points”, which would induce a “gradual mellowing” of Stalin’s rule. The Soviet system had to evolve or it would collapse. The US did not have to defeat the Soviet Union. Only to outlast it and measure up to its own best traditions, worthy of preservation as a great nation.

#### **‘What Kennan really meant to say’**

A long paper often has the effect of many people agreeing with parts of it and a kind of cottage industry developed among Cold War scholars about “what Kennan really meant to say”.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Kennan’s ideas seldom were fully consistent. His strength laid in analysis, not in the implementation of policy. In September 1946 he even suggested within the inner circles of government a preventive nuclear war to deter feared Soviet aggression. He also pushed for clandestine sabotage operations against the Soviets and armed support for anti-communist movements, which seemed to be more consistent with the ‘roll-back’ policy he opposed than with containment. Niall Ferguson’s book about Kissinger mentions the Kennan proposal to postpone the Italian elections for fear of a communist win.<sup>3</sup> At the

other end of the debate he objected to the formation of NATO, at least as a military alliance, the re-arming of West Germany and the building of a nuclear arsenal. In April 1947 he claimed that ten good atomic hits would be enough to wipe out Soviet industry, so more nuclear weapons should not be a priority. Other means were necessary to prevent Moscow from scoring many geopolitical victories. But to be fair to Kennan, he never intended his telegram as a comprehensive statement of national strategy.

As director of the State Department's policy planning think-tank and thereafter, Kennan came to regret the use of the word 'counterforce' and vehemently denied having intended any military dimension of containment. Counterforce yes, but in the form of diplomacy and covert action keeping short of war. In a study of 1948 he regarded armed strength essential as a means of making political positions credible, as a deterrent to attack and as an encouragement to allies (and only in last resort for waging war). He applied this concept as one of the intellectual architects of the Marshall Plan which helped Western Europe to rebuild and keep its democratic vigour against communist expansion.

In 1950 the strategic picture in Asia worsened and Dean Acheson, first regarded as the mentor of Kennan, scrambled to add a military dimension to containment, declaring a defence perimeter to defend Japan, Okinawa and the Philippines (but not including South Korea). It overtook the strategy of strong points defence. Kennan was thought to be too subtle and was replaced by Paul Nitze. NSC document 68 proposed a rapid build-up of political, economic and military strength of the free world.<sup>4</sup>

In Kissinger's analysis, US strategy on the Soviet Union began with containment, which already under Truman drew the country into peripheral actions. Eisenhower adopted the alternative of excessive reliance on the threat of all-out nuclear war — massive retaliation — as financially the best affordable option. A combination with strengthening conventional forces and fighting a war in Korea would be unsustainable. Yet, his strategy was not as monolithic as it might have seemed. The revamped National Security Council drafted an approach with seven pillars: preventing a nuclear holocaust, the feasibility of deterrence, the necessity of a secure 'second strike' capability, the abandonment of a forcible 'roll-back' of the Soviet empire as a US goal, the recognition of the long-term character of the Cold War, the strengthening of US alliances in Europe and Asia, and the pursuit of realistic forms of arms control. The means to these ends would extend far beyond the Strategic Air Command and would embrace diplomacy, psychological warfare, and covert operations.<sup>5</sup>

### **A stranger in his own country**

As a diplomat Kennan was not a great success. His worst moment came in 1952 when, as ambassador to the Soviet Union, he allowed himself on a trip to Berlin to compare his life in Moscow with his days in Hitler's Germany. Stalin declared him *persona non grata*, ending his ambassadorship after five months. In 1961-63 he served as ambassador to Yugoslavia and resigned soon after Tito had taken a neutral position on the Soviet threat to West Berlin.

Kennan was not a universalist and was weary of trying to impose the American model upon others and was sceptical of the United Nations. He got caught by the fact that sometimes truth is stronger than fiction. His understanding of history, continuity and culture remained precious, but (fortunately) could not entirely predict the course of events. Kennan felt that

German rearmament within NATO would make a European solution forever impossible. And he was not the only one who did not believe in German unification. Yet, he also foresaw the collapse of the Soviet Union, which finally happened in 1992 primarily due to internal developments and — thanks to Gorbachev — fundamentally changed the situation in Europe. In 2014 Fareed Zakaria headed his review of *The Kennan Diaries* with ‘The poetic, impractical conservatism of a Cold War Strategist’<sup>6</sup> To him Kennan’s genius was to perceive accurately the essence of other countries and to connect them to their past, but he failed to understand the forces of modernity and in his own country remained a bewildered guest, fearing danger and disaster.

Kennan was awarded the peace prize of the German book-fair in 1982 and he gave a speech on “Get to work for peace, now!” It came in the middle of the debate on nuclear disarmament, the zero-option for intermediate range ballistic missiles, a declaration of no-first use, or even total denuclearisation of Europe (which Kennan had favored in his State Department days). His basic premise was that he did not see any East-West conflict important enough to warrant a conventional war, let alone a nuclear exchange. That might have been true in the eighties, but the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 came very close.<sup>7</sup> Today, positions have reversed with Putin (and the president of North Korea) bombastically talking about nuclear weapons. It looks like he has adopted the strategy of flexible response, while the US looks at a kind of equilibrium in nuclear weapons at the lowest possible level.

In terms of Russian strategy Kennan had a point in stressing their permanent desire for a security corridor along the borders. The enlargement of NATO might have increased the exaggerated Russian feeling of encirclement. He also was right in preferring political and economic methods over military strategy. That certainly makes more sense today when notions of ‘hybrid war’ show that only comprehensive approaches have a chance of being effective.<sup>8</sup> Involvement should be the corollary to containment, but where will they touch each other? And which actions by the West will have an impact on Russian behavior? Clearly Russia aims at zones of influence around her borders, but Putin seems to have overplayed his hand in Ukraine and in the other frozen conflict. In the West few people trust him anymore and there is unexpectedly large support for continuing economic sanctions, even if declining oil prices might be the major cause of the Russian recession.

Professor Stephen Kotkin of Princeton University (where Kennan was a member of the Class of ’25 and after his diplomatic stints a scholar in the Institute of Advanced Study and a much appreciated occasional lecturer in the Department of Politics) expects that if Kennan would be alive today, he would advocate a policy of not overestimating the Russian menace or underestimating America’s manifold advantages, building up US alliances as a basis for negotiating from strength.<sup>9</sup> As a rule Kennan sought the narrow path between showdown and conciliation, either of which could lead to unnecessary war, which leads Kotkin to exclaim: “Diplomacy never gets any easier!”

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<sup>1</sup> Extensive excerpts of the Long Telegram of February 12, 1946 are included as annex C of *George F. Kennan, Memoirs 1925-1950*. Pantheon Books, N.Y., 1967.

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<sup>2</sup> John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment. A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*. Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Niall Ferguson, *op.cit.*, Note on p.268.

<sup>4</sup> John Gaddis is highly critical of NSC-68 : a committee project recommending measures undercutting the goals it was trying to achieve. If all US interests were now vital, negotiations would require Soviet capitulation. *op.cit.* p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Kissinger, 1923-1968: The Idealist*, p. 345, 362.

<sup>6</sup> *International New York Times*, 25 February 25, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> See Niall Ferguson in *Kissinger 1929-1968*, p. 545-559. The main text of Kennan's speech in Frankfurt was printed in the Dutch newspaper *Het Parool* of October 12, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Thompson wrote in the *International Herald Tribune* of August 1, 2007: America's 'containment policy', a war best served cold.

<sup>9</sup> "What would Kennan do ?" *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, March 2, 2016. Kennan died in Princeton in 2005, aged 101.