

Containing Iran

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- Since the 1979 revolution, containment has been the default policy of the United States toward Iran. It has never been a policy eagerly embraced by any U.S. administration.
- Containment has had some successes. It has been effective in partially isolating Iran. It has hamstrung Tehran's efforts to develop a capable military. It has limited Iran's ability to play an influential role in the geo-politics of southwest Asia. And it has constrained Iran's economic growth.
- But containment has also had limits. It has not prevented Iran from supporting a wide range of violent extremist groups. Tehran has continued to develop an arsenal of ballistic missiles and a nuclear enrichment program. And the Islamic republic has stoked the instability in several Middle East countries.
- Unless the Iranian regime collapses or evolves into something quite different – or the United States wages a third major war in the Middle East – containment is likely to remain the cornerstone of U.S. policy on Iran for some time.

Overview

The Carter administration attempted to develop normal diplomatic ties with the Islamic Republic after the revolution. But the White House reluctantly shifted to a policy of containment after the seizure of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran 10 months later. Containment has remained America's core strategy toward Iran because every administration since Carter has opted to pay as little attention to Iran as possible without jeopardizing U.S. interests in the Middle East. But several presidents deliberately avoided describing their policies as containment.

Containment endures because it is a minimalist strategy. It is a default position when engagement at any level is blocked and warfare is too costly or unattractive. Containment is predicated on two assumptions: First, the United States is not willing to expend the blood and treasure to remove the Tehran regime by force. Second, Iran is not interested in a peaceful relationship with Washington and, if left to its own devices, would try to overturn the current Middle East order to America's disadvantage. Containment's goal is to minimize Tehran's ability to cause mischief beyond its borders, destabilize the region, and hurt America's allies. Containment allows the United States to devote far fewer resources than would be needed to overthrow the regime.

Understanding containment

At the beginning of the Cold War, George Kennan introduced the idea of "containing" an unfriendly state in his work on U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union. It

was based on two assumptions: For both ideological and geostrategic reasons, the United States and the Soviet Union would always be adversaries. And the United States would not try to eliminate the communist regime by force because of the unacceptable costs of war in the nuclear age. Containment was an alternative strategy to block political expansion, undermine the economy and prevent military aggression until the regime collapsed from its own defects in 1991.

Because of containment's success with the Soviet Union, the United States adapted it for a host of other challenges, including China, North Korea, Cuba, Libya, Iraq, Nicaragua, Angola, Ethiopia and Afghanistan. It has become the default policy whenever normal diplomatic relations are impossible. It is useful because it is highly flexible. Washington has pursued aggressive versions, as in Iraq between 1991 and 2003, and passive versions, as in Afghanistan between 1989 and 2001.

Containment options

With Iran, Washington's use of containment has been erratic, ranging from passive isolation to highly confrontational. The core elements of U.S. containment of Iran have remained largely unchanged, although the intensity has varied markedly. These include:

- **Diplomatic efforts** to isolate Tehran and enlist as many countries as possible to help the United States in containing Iran.
- **Sanctions** to prevent Iran from becoming economically or militarily powerful. These have especially focused on preventing or dissuading Iran from acquiring ballistic missiles or weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons.
- **Covert action** to support various groups inside Iran that have opposed the regime politically and/or militarily.
- **"Red Lines,"** spelled out either explicitly or implicitly, that would trigger the use of U.S. force if Tehran crossed them.
- **Military deployment**, such as basing U.S. forces along the Persian Gulf to defend American allies, deter an Iranian attack, and enforce the red lines.

Five presidents: A brief history

The Carter administration tried to roll back the revolution by dispatching a senior U.S. general with close ties to Iranian military leaders to encourage them to seize power. When that gambit failed, Washington reversed gears, reached out to the new regime and offered to establish normal relations. That policy went up in smoke in November 1979, when Iranian students seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, kicking off the 444-day hostage crisis.

Carter considered a range of military options but eventually settled for a policy of pressuring Iran through economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation. Responding to fears of U.S. allies in the Persian Gulf, Washington also increased its military assets in the region to deter or defeat any Iranian attempt to spread its revolution by force. In effect, if not original intent, it was a policy of containing Iran—limiting its ability to cause harm beyond its borders and hindering its ability to generate greater power.

The Reagan administration was deeply critical of its predecessor, yet still adopted containment as its own policy. It showed a remarkable reluctance to confront Iran during both terms, despite its aggressive “cowboy” reputation and repeated Iranian provocations. Washington opted not to respond militarily even after Iranian Revolutionary Guards deployed to Lebanon, created Hezbollah, and facilitated the 1983 and 1984 suicide bombings of two American embassies and the U.S. Marine peacekeepers barracks in Beirut, the latter killing 241 Marines. Iran also had a role in the abduction of several American hostages in Beirut.

Reagan’s containment tactics included building up U.S. military forces in the Gulf and increasing arms sales to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council sheikhdoms. Washington also tilted toward Iraq in 1982, after Iran’s battlefield victories in the war allowed it to push into Iraq. Tehran vowed to topple Saddam Hussein and march to Karbala and/or Jerusalem. The United States renewed diplomatic relations with Iraq, which Baghdad severed during the 1967 war. It also provided Iraq with trade credits and critical intelligence on Iran’s military. And it encouraged European allies to supply Iraq with weapons paid for by U.S. Gulf allies.

The Reagan Administration departed briefly from containment when it attempted a tactical rapprochement with Tehran in the mid 1980s to help free American hostages held by its allies in Lebanon. The subsequent arms-for-hostage swap ended in humiliation when Iranian hardliners leaked news of the secret diplomacy. The United States then reverted to a restrained version of containment.

Washington was initially reluctant to defend Gulf Arab oil tankers that came under attack from Iranian forces in the Persian Gulf. When it finally agreed to deploy additional U.S. ships to defend the tankers in 1986-87, the administration issued tight rules of engagement. Washington intervened repeatedly to prevent conflict with Tehran. Iranian attacks on U.S. ships provoked limited U.S. counterstrikes, although the disparity in strength was so great that the U.S. Navy still sunk about one-half of Iran’s major surface warships.

The administration of George H. W. Bush took office looking to improve relations with Iran. Bush suggested in his inaugural address that “good will begets good will.” But when Iran helped win freedom for the last American hostages in

Lebanon, Washington did not respond and his initiative came to naught. Other demands—the fall of communism, the crisis with China over Tiananmen Square and the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War—led Bush to rely on passive containment of Iran. Washington ended up virtually ignoring Tehran.

The Clinton administration proclaimed a strategy of “dual containment” toward both Iran and Iraq. President Clinton believed a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace was finally possible, but feared Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and revolutionary Iran would try to undermine the process. So Washington sought to limit the damage from either regime. Iran pushed back with an aggressive asymmetric campaign against U.S. interests and allies, which led Washington to get tougher. Goaded by Congress, the administration imposed comprehensive unilateral sanctions on Iran, threatened secondary sanctions on non-American companies doing significant business with Iran’s oil industry, and rejuvenated the moribund covert action campaign against Iran. Clinton’s first term witnessed the most aggressive containment pursued against the Islamic Republic.

But Clinton’s second term overlapped with the 1997 election of reformist Mohammad Khatami as president and a slow shift in policy. Khatami reached out to the United States to try to bring down “the wall of mistrust.” The Clinton administration hoped Khatami’s opening offered the potential to end two decades of hostility and tried a string of unilateral gestures to try to help Khatami. But once again, Iran’s hardliners killed the budding reconciliation.

The administration of George W. Bush embraced containment after the rejected U.S. overture, although it demonstrated some flexibility after the 9/11 attacks. Washington and Tehran cooperated extensively, first in helping the Northern Alliance oust their mutual adversaries, the Taliban and al-Qaeda, and then in forging an interim government in Afghanistan. Some in Tehran apparently hoped to turn tacit cooperation into a wider opening. But tentative diplomacy died after President Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address lumped Iran with Iraq and North Korea in an “axis of evil.” The United States again settled into a containment strategy, especially after the U.S. invasion of neighboring Iraq triggered new tensions between Washington and Tehran.

Nuclear complications

U.S. complacency was shattered in 2002, with revelations about secret facilities that indicated Iran was making greater progress in acquiring a nuclear capability than previously believed. Washington feared Iran’s progress would seriously undermine containment, increase regional instability, and even endanger conflict. In response, the Bush administration and then the Obama administration tried a “carrot and stick” approach to convince Iran to halt its nuclear program. In both instances, Washington and its allies offered Tehran economic and diplomatic incentives to halt the program, while threatening more stringent sanctions if it refused.

The shift was intended to shore up containment and prevent Iran from increasing its military might with weapons of mass destruction. But both Bush and Obama also expected the strategy to deepen the policy debate in Tehran. They hoped that pragmatists willing to accept restrictions on Iran's nuclear program in return for concessions would prevail over hardliners unwilling to give up the nuclear program at all. This gambit also calculated that a victory by pragmatists might lead to their ascendance – and in turn new openings for rapprochement.

The future

- Many fear that Iran's eventual acquisition of a nuclear capability could fatally compromise containment. It could eliminate the ultimate deterrent of an American conventional military attack as a restraint on aggressive Iranian efforts to destabilize the Middle East.
- Others believe that making containment work will be more important than ever once Iran achieves a nuclear capability because it will once and for all rule out an American invasion of Iran, but could in turn make Tehran feel more secure in confronting the United States – and therefore less inclined to improve relations.
- A nuclear Iran would create additional challenges for containment by potentially convincing some of Iran's neighbors to acquire nuclear capabilities of their own.
- It would also create potentially worrisome interactions between Iran and Israel, which might engage in unconventional warfare against each other that would likely provoke dangerous nuclear stand-offs between Jerusalem and Tehran.

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