

Background

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Containing a Nuclear Iran: Difficult, Costly, and Dangerous

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Abstract: *Proponents of a containment policy toward Iran are ignoring the harsh realities inherent in seriously pursuing such a policy. First, the U.S. has been trying to contain Iran since the Iranian revolution in 1979, with little success. If Iran develops a nuclear weapon, it will become even more difficult to contain. A serious containment policy will require the U.S. to maintain a credible threat of force against Iran. This will be even more difficult if Iran goes nuclear because the U.S. will have lost credibility. A containment policy will also require the U.S. to support the undemocratic governments in the countries neighboring Iran, which will pose many political dilemmas. Instead of pursuing a policy of containment, which would be a policy in name only, the U.S. should keep the military option alive, defend itself and its allies, and seek both to weaken the regime's economic base and to empower and encourage its domestic adversaries.*

The Obama Administration's engagement policy toward Iran is dead but not buried. Although this policy has failed to halt Iran's nuclear program or even to facilitate substantive negotiations with Tehran, the Administration continues to adhere to its two-track diplomatic strategy of engagement backed by sanctions. For its part, Iran's defiant regime is willingly accepting the costs of the economic, political, and diplomatic sanctions in order to realize its nuclear weapons ambitions.

While the Obama Administration maintains that the military option is on the table, it has done little to convince Tehran that it is serious. If this trend contin-

Talking Points

- Containing a nuclear Iran will be difficult, costly, and dangerous and will pose a challenge that the Obama Administration is ill suited to meet.
- At its best, "containment" summarizes a range of demanding policies across a wide range of issues. At its worst, containment is a lullaby intended to lull the American people into ignoring their adversaries. Regrettably, that is the role it is playing today.
- Iran's nuclear program is not a reason to argue that the U.S. should seek to contain Iran, but a reason to be concerned about further weakening of the U.S. ability to contain Iran in the future.
- The U.S. should take the lead in identifying the Iranian regime as the problem and Iran's nuclear weapons program as the most troubling symptom of that problem. It should then promote change in Iran and protect itself and its allies until that change occurs.

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ues, containment of a nuclear Iran will become the default option for the United States. Before this happens, the Administration should carefully weigh the costs, risks, benefits, and feasibility of such a policy.

Containing a nuclear Iran will be difficult, costly, and dangerous and will pose a challenge that the Obama Administration is ill suited to meet.

- Containment will require deterring Iran with a credible threat of the use of force, but the Administration's credibility will be severely undermined if Tehran acquires the nuclear capability that the President has warned is unacceptable.
- Containment will require a firm American determination to confront Iranian aggression with overwhelming force, a determination the Administration has not evinced.
- Containment will require reliable and capable allies, but the Administration has distanced itself from Israel, the only such ally the U.S. has in the Middle East.
- Containment will require the U.S. to confront Iran's terrorist surrogates, but the terrorists operate in a murky realm and will be difficult to deter and contain.

In short, containment is a very demanding policy option, and the Administration's policies to date have made it even more difficult to implement. The United States should instead keep the military option convincingly alive, adopt policies to promote change in Iran, and protect itself and its allies until that change occurs.

The Limits of Containment

By itself, "containment" is simply a word. The argument that the U.S. can or should contain Iran in response to the Iranian nuclear program is often advanced as though the word "containment" possesses magic power. The word is used to wish away the problems that Iran poses for the U.S. by borrowing the prestige of the policy of containment, the policy that helped to produce the West's victory in

the Cold War. Using the word implies that because containment worked against the Soviet Union, it will work against Iran. This supposedly renders it unnecessary to consider the issue further.

However, if U.S. policy is to contain Iran, U.S. actions toward Iran must—if the word "containment" is to have any meaning—bear some similarity to the policies the U.S. employed to contain the Soviet Union. The history of the Cold War clearly shows that containment is a demanding policy, not an easy option. It has serious implications for political, economic, diplomatic, and military power. Furthermore, containment of the Soviet Union was controversial and not always successful. Containment sometimes failed precisely because it was so demanding, and both the policy and its failures were controversial.

Finally, as John Lewis Gaddis, a distinguished historian of the Cold War, points out, while some of the principles behind containment may be transferable, it "cannot be expected to succeed...in circumstances that differ significantly from those that gave rise to it, sustained it, and within which it eventually prevailed."¹ The Obama Administration cannot safely assume that the U.S. can contain a nuclear Iran, because the current circumstances do differ significantly from those during the Cold War in ways that would make containing the Iranian threat difficult, costly, and dangerous.

Containment as the Status Quo

Containment of Iran would not be a new policy for the United States. It has been American policy since the Iranian revolution of 1979 to contain the regime.² Yet past U.S. efforts to contain Iran have not succeeded in stemming the expansion of Tehran's malevolent influence.

Although Iran's Shia Islamist brand of revolution has limited appeal to most Sunni Muslims, who comprise the majority sect in the Middle East, Iran's revolutionary regime has cultivated ties with large Shiite communities in Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain

1. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War*, rev. and expanded ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 383.

2. See James Phillips, "Containing Iran," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 980, March 9, 1994, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/1994/03/Containing-Iran>.

as well as important Shiite minorities in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Kuwait, and elsewhere in the Middle East. Following Iran's revolution, a Shiite uprising was suppressed in Saudi Arabia in 1979, and an Iran-backed coup was quashed in Bahrain in 1981. Iranian efforts to subvert and radicalize Iraq's Shiite majority prompted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein to invade Iran in September 1980, starting a bloody eight-year war that inflicted more than 1 million casualties.

While the Iran–Iraq war blunted Iran's immediate threat in the Persian Gulf, Iran successfully exported its revolution to Lebanon, where it created, funded, armed, trained, and guided Hezbollah (“Party of God”), a revolutionary Lebanese Shiite organization. Tehran dispatched hundreds of Revolutionary Guards to Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, where they assisted and directed Hezbollah's terrorist campaign against Western peacekeeping forces and Israeli forces in southern Lebanon, as well as bombings of the U.S. Marine barracks and U.S. embassy in Beirut.

Containment of the Soviet Union sometimes failed precisely because it was a demanding policy, and both the policy and its failures were controversial.

Tehran also developed a strategic alliance with Syria and, to a lesser extent, with Sudan through which it cultivated close ties to a wide array of radical Sunni Arab terrorist groups, including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command, and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which later merged into al-Qaeda. Iran has used these and other terrorist groups as surrogates to strike at its avowed enemies, including the United States, Israel, France, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Kuwait, and at other targets of opportunity.

The 1991 Gulf War, which reversed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and the U.N. sanctions imposed

after the regime violated the cease-fire greatly weakened Iraq, Iran's strongest Arab neighbor. The Clinton Administration adopted its dual containment strategy to contain and deter both Iran and Iraq.

However, both regimes actively resisted containment and continued to support terrorist attacks against various neighbors and the United States. In June 1996, Iran's Revolutionary Guards supported a terrorist bombing by the Saudi branch of Hezbollah that killed 19 American servicemen stationed in Saudi Arabia. The massive truck bombing of the Khobar Towers housing complex in Dhahran targeted U.S. military personnel that were enforcing the no-fly zone over southern Iraq.³ By launching the attack, Tehran drove up the costs to the U.S. of the dual containment policy and the costs to the Saudi government of cooperating with Washington in containing Iran.

In addition to supporting terrorist attacks against Americans in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, Iran has ordered its proxies to attack U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, Iran is pursuing a strategy similar to its strategy in Lebanon by working to radicalize, arm, train, and direct Iraqi Shiite militias and using them to attack U.S. troops and undermine the Iraqi government.⁴

The manifest failure of U.S. efforts to contain Iranian influence and deter attacks on Americans in the past 30 years should raise alarms about the much greater difficulty inherent in containing and deterring Tehran after it acquires nuclear weapons. To argue the merits of containment now that Iran is on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons is to argue for a policy that has been tried for decades—a policy that is now close to an enormous defeat because of the progress of Iran's nuclear program.

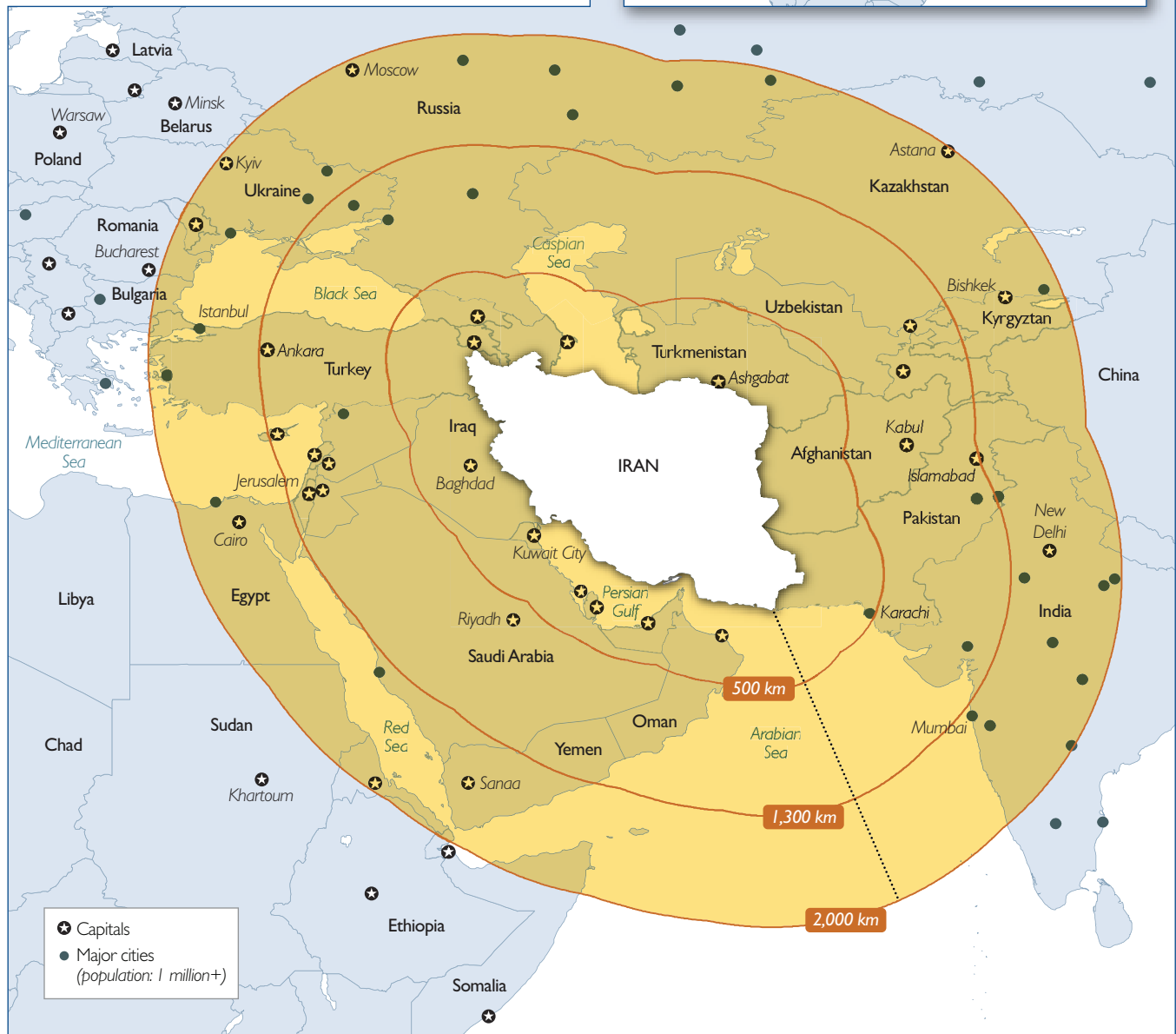
A nuclear-armed Iran will be far more difficult to contain than one without nuclear weapons simply because credibly threatening a nuclear Iran will be much more difficult. The Iranian regime recognizes this, and it is one reason Iran is seeking to develop

3. See James Phillips, “Maintain International Pressure and Sanctions on Iran,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1135, September 5, 1997, pp. 8–9, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/1997/09/BG1135nbs-Maintain-International-Pressure-and-Sanctions-on-Iran>.

4. See James Phillips, “Iran's Hostile Policies in Iraq,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2030, April 30, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2007/04/Irans-Hostile-Policies-in-Iraq>.

The Threat of Iran

Iran's most advanced missile has an estimated range of 2,000 kilometers (about 1,200 miles). It poses a threat to many U.S. allies in the Middle East, to several NATO allies, and to U.S. military facilities in the region. Iran is continuing to develop and buy improved missile technology. If Iran acquires nuclear weapons, containing it will be difficult and dangerous in part because Iran can threaten many U.S. interests and allies.



Source: Heritage Foundation research.

Map I • B 2517 heritage.org

nuclear weapons. As Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli said, “Nuclear energy is just like armor which protects us from the enemy’s attack.”⁵ In short, Iran’s nuclear program is not a reason to argue that the U.S. should seek to contain Iran, but a reason to be concerned about further weakening of the U.S. ability to contain Iran in the future.

A nuclear-armed Iran will be far more difficult to contain than one without nuclear weapons simply because credibly threatening a nuclear Iran will be much more difficult.

This fact points out one of the fundamental requirements of any policy of containment: The U.S. must be willing to threaten—and threaten credibly—the nation being contained with the use of force if it breaches containment. Thus, a containment policy, which seeks to stop the expansion of another nation’s power or influence, requires simultaneously pursuing a policy of deterrence to dissuade that nation from challenging its containment.

For deterrence to work, the U.S. threat of force must be credible. Otherwise, the nation being contained will likely ignore it. Under several Administrations, the U.S. has clearly stated that Iran’s possession of nuclear weapons would be “unacceptable,” but if Iran nevertheless succeeds in acquiring them, U.S. credibility will be severely damaged.⁶ Again, Iran’s nuclear program is not a reason to adopt a policy of containment, but a reason that will make the policy more difficult to pursue in the future.

The Obama Administration, which called on Iran to “take its rightful place in the community of nations,” has done little to build a credible belief

that it would respond forcefully to an Iranian challenge of containment.⁷ During the Cold War, containment was a necessary precondition to successful negotiations with the Soviet Union, which otherwise had little incentive to talk constructively. The Obama Administration has reversed this order of priorities by seeking to negotiate first and then to contain when negotiations failed.

This approach was based on the Administration’s naive belief that Iran’s hostility would diminish if the U.S. behaved differently. In fact, hostility to the U.S. is part of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s founding ideology. Predictably, Iran took the Administration’s extended hand as an indication that the U.S. was repenting of its past mistakes and would therefore be an easy mark. The Administration has thus not created the public image that it is willing to respond with overwhelming military force to an Iranian breach of containment, and this now further handicaps it in dealing with Iran. In short, the Administration’s actions have undermined containment as a policy option.

Containment Requires Allies

During the Cold War, the U.S. did not contain the Soviet Union alone. It worked closely with allies around the world, from the Western European nations in NATO to Australia, South Korea, and Japan in the Pacific. If Iran is to be contained, the U.S. will again need the support of reliable, willing, and capable allies—preferably democratic ones—that would resolutely oppose any expansion of Iranian influence. Yet the only U.S. ally in the Middle East that fulfills all of these criteria is Israel, from which the Administration has sought to distance itself.⁸ Iraq would also be an essential U.S. ally in containing Iran, but the Administration has been eager to reduce the size and scope of the U.S. pres-

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5. Ali Alfoneh, “Iran News Roundup,” American Enterprise Institute, December 3, 2010, at <http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-roundup-december-3-2010> (January 24, 2011).
 6. Agence France-Presse, “Iran’s Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons ‘Unacceptable’: Obama,” Google News, November 7, 2008, at http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jd7CNq_U-GYQVuGA_4u0z8BDymTw (November 16, 2010).
 7. Thomas Erdbrink and Glenn Kessler, “Obama’s Tone in Iran Message Differs Sharply from Bush’s,” *The Washington Post*, March 21, 2009, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/20/AR2009032000398.html> (November 16, 2010).
 8. James Phillips, “The Obama–Netanyahu Meeting: Closer Cooperation Needed,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2949, July 2, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/07/The-Obama-Netanyahu-Meeting-Closer-Cooperation-Needed>.

ence in Iraq as rapidly as possible, even at the cost of increasing the dangers of Iranian infiltration.⁹

The situation in the Middle East as a whole is no more encouraging. To fully contain Iran, the U.S. would need the support of all of Iran's neighbors, just as it needed the support of the states surrounding the Soviet Union to contain the Soviets during the Cold War. The states surrounding Iran include Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Turkey.

During the Cold War, the U.S. sought to break the relationships between the Soviet Union and its client states, such as Cuba, and worked openly and covertly to defeat Communist parties around the world. Similarly, the U.S. would need to break the close relationship between Iran and Syria and end Iran's extensive influence in Lebanon, which gives it an outlet into the Mediterranean and a staging area for attacks on Israel.

Finally, the U.S. would need to apply economic pressure to cut off or limit Iran's trade, as the U.S. did to the Soviet Union during the Cold War. For these purposes, the U.S. would need the backing of the major trading states in Europe and Asia.

These are extremely demanding requirements. Even breaking the Iranian-Syrian axis or expelling Iranian influence from Lebanon would be a major U.S. triumph. It is highly unlikely that all of the states bordering Iran would resolutely help the U.S. in containing Iran. Some of them, preeminently Saudi Arabia, are long-time Iranian rivals and would likely side with the U.S., but others would find it more convenient to play both sides of the fence. Still others are too weak domestically to play a substantial role.

In these cases, the U.S. would confront the unenviable problem that it often faced during the Cold

War: the need to support a regional ally, usually a nondemocratic ally, that could not stand on its own, such as South Vietnam. In such cases, the U.S. had a double burden: fighting off the external enemy while seeking to build the domestic capabilities of the threatened state. The U.S. is facing this very challenge in Afghanistan today. Liberals who are queasy about the war there should think twice before advocating a policy that will involve the U.S. in some of the same dilemmas of state-building throughout the Persian Gulf.

To fully contain Iran, the U.S. would need the support of all of Iran's neighbors, just as it needed the support of the states surrounding the Soviet Union to contain the Soviets during the Cold War.

Building the broader coalition necessary for the economic containment of Iran would be even more challenging. The European Union—including the important NATO members Germany, Italy, and France—is Iran's leading trading partner.¹⁰ Iran's nuclear power plant was built with technical assistance from Russia, which also supplies Iran with advanced weaponry.¹¹ Iran is a major exporter of oil to Japan, China, India, and South Korea, among other states, and has a particularly close relationship with China as well as with regional nuisances Venezuela and Cuba.¹²

In the world today, there is simply no analogy to the broad political, economic, diplomatic, and U.S.-led military alliance against the Soviet Union that made containment possible. NATO itself is reluctant to identify Iran as a potential threat, blocked by Turkey's warming relations with Iran. An Iranian test of a nuclear device might generate the political basis for such an alliance, but a nuclear Iran would

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9. Michael R. Gordon and Andrew W. Lehren, "Leaked Reports Detail Iran's Aid for Iraqi Militias," *The New York Times*, October 22, 2010, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/23/world/middleeast/23iran.html> (November 16, 2010).
 10. European Commission, "Trade: Iran (Bilateral Relations)," September 3, 2010, at <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/creating-opportunities/bilateral-relations/countries/iran> (November 15, 2010).
 11. James Phillips, "Iran's Nuclear Program: What Is Known and Unknown," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2393, March 26, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/03/iran-s-nuclear-program-what-is-known-and-unknown>.
 12. U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Iran," *Country Analysis Brief*, January 2010, at <http://www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/Iran/Oil.html> (November 15, 2010).

also make a policy of containment far more difficult to carry out.

Containment Requires Firm and Vigilant Responses to Subversion

During the Cold War, the Soviet threat was partially military. It was at least conceivable that the Soviets would invade Western Europe, the one region that the forces of democracy could not afford to lose. In contrast, the Iranian threat is much more likely to work through terrorist groups than through direct military action, such as closing the Strait of Hormuz. Of course, this is not a new problem. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union helped to arm, train, and inspire guerrilla movements around the world. By so doing, the Soviet Union posed three challenges for the United States.

First, it was not always clear whether or to what extent these movements, or indeed entire nations, were acting under Soviet control or influence. Thus, there were always arguments that U.S. interests were not genuinely engaged in a particular country. For example, it was not known until decades after the Korean War that Stalin had personally authorized the North Korean invasion of South Korea.¹³

In the case of Iran, this ambiguity would shroud every political and military event in the Middle East. Iranian involvement would often become clear only after many years had passed, if then. For example, Iran's role in the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut and the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers housing complex in Saudi Arabia did not become clear until much later. In the interim, there would be legitimate disagreement about the extent of Iranian involvement, while states, non-state actors, and individuals opposed to a policy of containment would exploit every uncertainty to undermine the policy.

Second, even when the Soviet Union was clearly seeking to undermine a friendly government, the U.S. had trouble finding ways to impose costs on the Soviet Union for its involvement. In the strategic balance of terror between the two nuclear-armed

superpowers, trying to hold the Soviet Union fully responsible for its actions was believed to be too dangerous to contemplate. Therefore, during the Cold War, the U.S. focused on opposing the manifestations of perceived Soviet influence abroad by supporting friendly governments politically, militarily, and economically. The same dilemma would confront the U.S. in seeking to contain a nuclear-armed Iran. In practice, containment means dealing with the symptoms, not the disease.

In the early 1970s, President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger tried to apply the policy of linkage, which sought Soviet and Communist Chinese restraint in promoting revolution in exchange for U.S. agreement in the nuclear and economic realms.¹⁴ This policy appealed to supporters of détente in part because the U.S. was in a weak strategic position after the Vietnam War. However, linkage did not accept that the Communist regimes were systemically hostile to the West. It therefore traded permanent U.S. concessions for temporary Communist concessions. As a result, it proved unsustainable both internationally and domestically.

The U.S. would face—indeed, it is now facing—precisely the same dilemma in applying a policy of linkage to Iran. A totalitarian state, such as the Soviet Union or Iran, can cheat on its public commitments more easily than the United States can.

Third, while containing and deterring a conventional state may be possible, it is much less clear that religious zealots or terrorist groups can be contained, especially if they are willing to commit suicide for their cause. In the post-9/11 context, this dilemma has become particularly acute. This is one realm in which the Cold War experience sheds less light on U.S. policy toward Iran.

During the Cold War, U.S. policymakers could generally assume that the Soviet leaders were not eager to die for Communism. There is serious doubt that all of Iran's leaders share this sentiment about the Shia faith, because their regime was founded on and is justified by a claim about religious truth. In

13. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Know Now: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 71.

14. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 317–318.

contrast to the Soviet Union, which was imbued with an ideology that promised the inevitable victory of Communism and prescribed constant evaluation of the correlation of forces before setting foreign policy, Iran's hard-line regime espouses an ideology that extols martyrdom and demands implacable resistance to the "satanic" power of the United States, which is viewed as the chief barrier to implementing the will of God on Earth.

Even more worrisome is that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and some members of his regime profess to believe in the imminent return of the Hidden Imam.¹⁵ According to Shia eschatology, the Hidden Imam will return one day as the Mahdi ("The Guided One") to lead the forces of righteousness against the forces of evil in one final apocalyptic battle. As a leading expert on Iran's Shiite ideology has written, "Ahmadinejad advocates a new version of apocalypticism, which states that human action is necessary to prepare for the Hidden Imam's return, if not to accelerate it."¹⁶ The danger is that Ahmadinejad or others who share his beliefs might seek to provoke conflict and turmoil to hasten the return of the Mahdi.

While containing and deterring a conventional state may be possible, it is much less clear that religious zealots or terrorist groups can be contained, especially if they are willing to commit suicide for their cause.

In any event, the high value placed on martyrdom may skew the perceptions of Iran's regime toward deterrence. As Middle East scholar Bernard Lewis has noted:

[W]ith these people in Iran, mutually assured destruction is not a deterrent factor, but rather an inducement. They feel that they can hasten the final messianic process.

This is an extremely dangerous situation of which it is important to be aware.¹⁷

Finally, even if the leaders of Iran are rational in the Western sense of the term and if their beliefs about the Mahdi play no role in their policymaking, there is no guarantee that their terrorist proxies share this rationality or that Iran will always have them under tight control. In short, the applicability of deterrence to regimes like Iran is highly questionable, especially given Iran's longstanding support for suicide terrorism.¹⁸

Containment Requires Problematic Political Relationships

During the Cold War, the U.S. sometimes needed to work on the basis that an enemy of the Soviet Union was a friend of the United States, even if the state in question was nondemocratic or even Communist. Thus, in the 1970s, the U.S. opened a relationship with China because of their shared hostility to the Soviet Union. This particular step was unpopular with many conservatives, but the alliances that containment required were often even more controversial on the left. Indeed, throughout the Cold War, the left regularly criticized containment because it required the U.S. to tolerate or even cooperate with bad regimes for the sake of stopping the worse evil of the Soviet Union.

As an abstract moral point, this criticism has some validity. However, as a matter of practical geopolitics, the U.S. could not and cannot work only with decent, stable democracies. There are not enough of them in the world, especially in the Middle East, for that to be a viable option. The left's enthusiasm for the containment of Iran, in light of its criticism of containment during the Cold War, is revealing in that it implies that the left is advocating containment of Iran as an attempt to avoid the issue and preclude any military options, not as a serious policy.

15. See Mohebat Ahdiyyih, "Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Fall 2008), pp. 27–36, at <http://www.meforum.org/1985/ahmadinejad-and-the-mahdi> (January 25, 2011).

16. Mehdi Khalaji, "Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy," Washington Institute for Near East Policy Policy Focus No. 79, January 2008, p. 32, at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus79Final.pdf> (January 25, 2011).

17. "Scholar: MAD Doctrine Does Not Apply to Iran," *World Tribune*, February 25, 2008, at http://www.worldtribune.com/worldtribune/WTARC/2008/me_iran_02_25.asp (January 25, 2011).

18. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 381–383.

Nonetheless, the broader point that containment requires the U.S. to support its allies is correct. During the Cold War, this meant both direct military support and broader political backing. Thus, NATO was founded in part as a military alliance to deter and, if necessary, to defeat a Soviet invasion of Western Europe. But more important, NATO was a political alliance intended to reassure the then-fragile democracies in Western Europe that the United States would not abandon them and would give them the necessary political support to reject Communism and other forms of political extremism and to move decisively toward capitalist democracy.¹⁹

A policy of containment of Iran would thus commit the U.S. to providing political support to the region's autocracies and dictatorships.

In postwar Western Europe, which was seeking to restore the democratic systems that had collapsed during the interwar years, this policy was not morally or politically problematic, although it required courage and leadership. Nor did U.S. support for a democratic Japan raise fundamental issues. However, in the Middle East there are no democracies for the U.S. to support, except for Israel, Turkey, and possibly Iraq. While Iran might choose to launch a nuclear attack, it would more likely use a nuclear arsenal to threaten and intimidate its neighbors, much as the Soviet Union's massive conventional superiority would have intimidated Western Europe if the U.S. had not formed NATO.

A policy of containment of Iran would thus commit the U.S. to providing political support to the region's autocracies and dictatorships, including some that are dominated by ruthless clans, tribes, or religious minorities. Even when the religious majority is in power, it will still mean supporting the existing undemocratic regime. While this may be necessary, it is far from ideal, and the costs of such a policy—which are illustrated by the current turmoil in Egypt, a long-time American ally—must be assessed honestly.

First, this policy poses an undeniable moral dilemma that cannot be resolved or evaded.

Second, while the U.S. must work in the world as it is, American policymakers who seek to contain Iran through a policy of regional alliances will regularly be described, especially by the left, as the friends and enablers of the oppressors.

Third, because it will be committed to the domestic stability of the region's regimes, the U.S. will find it difficult to encourage those regimes to make even small reforms. As soon as the U.S. raises a voice, the autocrat in question will immediately protest that any reforms will undermine the regime's stand against Iran.

This dilemma has stalemated U.S. policy in the Middle East for several generations. Except for President George W. Bush, no American leader has been willing to challenge the belief that America's fundamental interest rests in maintaining the existing order.

Yet by pursuing stability, the U.S. will help to breed instability over the long term by backing dictatorships, some of which tolerate, abet, and use terrorist organizations for their own purposes. More broadly, in this modern age, pursuing stability is paradoxically very demanding simply because it often means opposing political change and the social and economic forces that lead to it. A policy of Iranian containment would thus not create a new dilemma, but would sharpen an existing one, complicating U.S. efforts to address issues such as Saudi promotion of religious extremism, which in the long term also pose a serious threat to the U.S. and its allies around the world.

A close embrace of the United States and the presence of U.S. troops could also create political problems for the Middle East governments helping to contain Iran. By welcoming foreign troops, allied governments risk making themselves vulnerable to criticism by Islamist, nationalist, and xenophobic opposition forces, some of which would likely receive Iranian support. This could exacerbate internal political instability and attract unwanted attention from terrorist groups, particularly those

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72.

backed by Tehran. The prospective costs and risks of cooperating with Washington to contain Iran would complicate relations between the U.S. and its local allies while hindering efforts to contain Iran.

Containment Requires Military Alliances

While NATO was created largely to provide political reassurance to Western Europe, it was also a military alliance with a military purpose. Nor did NATO stand alone. During the Cold War, the U.S. built a worldwide network of military alliances and defense commitments. The most serious of these commitments was the extension of the U.S. nuclear umbrella to its allies. This meant that the U.S. based nuclear weapons on the territory of those allies and that the U.S. stated that it would regard a Soviet attack on those allies as an attack on the U.S. itself.

This was a necessary part of deterrence and containment. If the U.S. had disassociated itself from the security of its allies, the Soviet Union could have used its massive conventional superiority without fear of U.S. retaliation. In the Middle East, a policy of containment of Iran implies that the U.S. might need to extend the U.S. nuclear umbrella to its regional allies. This would be a revolutionary step—one that the Obama Administration, with its unwise enthusiasm for worldwide nuclear disarmament, is particularly ill suited to take.

Even an Administration not committed to nuclear disarmament might believe that extending the U.S. nuclear umbrella would be a step too far, but the U.S. would certainly need to extend its commitment to the conventional defense of the states bordering Iran. In July 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton explicitly admitted this:

We want Iran to calculate what I think is a fair assessment that if the United States extends a defense umbrella over the region, if we do even more to support the military capacity of those in the Gulf, it's unlikely that Iran will be any stronger or safer because

they won't be able to intimidate and dominate as they apparently believe they can once they have a nuclear weapon.²⁰

A policy of containment thus implies that the U.S. will expand its military presence in the Persian Gulf. This could mean many things. It might imply guarantees of conventional U.S. support. It might imply expanded U.S. bases in the region or more visible patrols. It certainly implies substantial U.S. arms sales, such as the \$60 billion sale of advanced aircraft and other weapons to Saudi Arabia that was announced in late October 2010. This sale, the largest in U.S. history, was justified as a contribution to “the regional balance of power in the Middle East”—in other words, a contribution to the containment of Iran.²¹ The sale immediately drew criticism from congressional Democrats and from the left.

Supporters of containment should recognize that pursuing a containment policy will require many more arms sales and spark much more criticism. Moreover, arms sold to Arab allies could help them resist Iran but could also threaten Israel. Worse, if a coup or revolution suddenly replaced a friendly Arab regime with a hostile regime, the U.S.-supplied arms could be turned against U.S. interests, just as Iran used U.S. arms originally provided to the Shah to threaten U.S. interests in the Gulf.

Regrettably, the proliferation of missile technology means that the Iranian threat is not limited to the states in Iran's immediate vicinity. Iran has already orbited a satellite. Today, Iran's missiles can reach portions of Europe, and Iran continues to develop more advanced systems. Unless the regime changes course fundamentally—and there is no sign of this—it will develop missiles that can reach all of Europe and eventually the United States.

Thus, to shield itself and its allies and to prevent itself from being blackmailed into breaches of containment, the U.S. needs to pursue missile defense systems to protect the U.S. homeland, not just theater or regional missile defense systems.

20. James Rosen, “Clinton: U.S. Will Extend ‘Defense Umbrella’ over Gulf if Iran Obtains Nuclear Weapons,” Fox News, July 22, 2009, at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/07/22/clinton-extend-defense-umbrella-gulf-iran-obtains-nuclear-weapons> (November 15, 2010).

21. Dana Hedgpeth, “Pentagon Plans \$60 Billion Weapons Sale to Saudi Arabia,” *The Washington Post*, October 21, 2010, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/20/AR2010102006518.html> (November 15, 2010).

Regrettably, the Obama Administration has sought to limit or cancel precisely these types of systems.²² In this realm, too, the Administration has undermined its ability to implement a policy of containment successfully.

Nor can the U.S. rely on espionage and covert action to contain Iran. The origins of the Stuxnet computer virus that has attacked Iran's nuclear program remain unclear, but the virus has analogies in the U.S. effort under President Ronald Reagan to covertly cripple the Western technology on which the Soviet Union relied. Such actions are important and valuable, and the U.S. should certainly pursue them, but they are ultimately only part of a much broader arsenal of policies that encompass the conventional, nuclear, moral, diplomatic, and economic realms.

Containment Is Not an Easy Answer

In short, containment's requirements are demanding. That is why containment did not always work during the Cold War. Despite U.S. efforts, Communism—sometimes aided by the Soviet Union and Communist China—spread to several countries in the Western Hemisphere and more widely in Africa and Asia. Containment was unpopular on the left, frequently controversial among conservatives, and criticized even by George Kennan, the U.S. diplomat most closely associated with it.

The history of the Cold War clearly shows that containment was neither politically easy nor invariably popular domestically. That is partly because containment, if taken seriously, will regularly involve the U.S. in wars and crises. Essentially, containment means that the U.S. must be willing to fight if the nation being contained crosses either a physical or metaphorical border.

The fundamental logic of containment is that the U.S., as a democratic and capitalist society, is stronger than its enemies and that their weaknesses will become apparent over time and ultimately destroy them.²³ That is true, but it is no reason to believe

that containment is therefore politically, economically, or morally easy. On the contrary, it is a long-term policy that requires a profound and enduring national commitment.

Regrettably, the proliferation of missile technology means that the Iranian threat is not limited to the states in Iran's immediate vicinity.

Calling for such a commitment is easy, but keeping it is difficult. Democracies are capable of manifesting such commitment, as the U.S. and its allies proved during the Cold War, but the Soviet Union posed an existential threat that concentrated the minds of many policymakers. Iran's nuclear program and the regime's hostility to the West have not produced an equivalent concentration among policymakers around the world, even among U.S. policymakers.

It is true that Iran is not the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was a formidable military power that made and could deliver advanced weapons, including a devastating nuclear arsenal. It controlled a vast empire and influenced many other societies. Its economy faltered and ultimately collapsed, but for decades it could mobilize substantial resources in pursuit of its aims, and it appeared to have no great need to become part of the free economic order. Above all, it had an ideology that—no matter how bizarre or inhumane—appealed to many around the world who sought to justify their pursuit of power.

By comparison, Iran's most significant military achievements apart from its nuclear and ballistic missile programs are its mobilization of suicide terrorists and its use of IEDs.²⁴ Its direct influence is regional, its economy is in shambles and relies heavily on oil exports, and its ideology appeals primarily to Shia who are embroiled in conflicts with non-Shia and have not had the misfortune to experience Iran's misgovernment directly.

22. Baker Spring, "The Obama Administration's Ballistic Missile Defense Program: Treading Water in Shark-Infested Seas," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2396, April 8, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/04/The-Obama-Administrations-Ballistic-Missile-Defense-Program-Treading-Water-in-Shark-Infested-Seas>.

23. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, pp. 386–387.

24. Improvised explosive devices, which have frequently been used against Coalition forces in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Yet the differences between Iran and the Soviet Union cut both ways. The magnitude of the Soviet threat enabled the West to summon the political will to contain it. Iran, precisely because it is not a superpower, cannot inspire such unified political will, even though it poses a clear threat. During the Cold War, the policy of containment was far from

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glorious, but it was necessary. The alternative to outlasting the Soviet Union was a war that no one would have won. Concluding that the only way to deal with Iran is to treat it like a new superpower gives Iran far too much credit. The Iranian regime may rhetorically aspire to become a superpower, but that aspiration is laughable.

By treating Iran like a new Soviet Union, the U.S. gives the Iranian regime a level of respect that its power does not merit. By emphasizing the containment of Iran, the U.S. would also slight the more positive and creative elements of its Cold War grand strategy, especially President Reagan’s policy of placing the Soviet Union under as much economic, diplomatic, and moral pressure as possible. The U.S. could and should similarly pressure Iran. However, as long as containment remains a mere analogy, devoid of policies reasonably comparable to those that the U.S. undertook during the Cold War, the U.S. will fail to build a comprehensive grand strategy to counter and ultimately end the Iranian menace.

Containment Requires a Commitment to Freedom at Home

Containment requires one more thing. As Aaron Friedberg has pointed out, U.S. grand strategy in

the Cold War emphasized avoiding “the garrison state.”²⁵ In other words, the U.S. was fighting to keep the world safe for democracy and capitalism. It was therefore vital to ensure that the U.S. preserve democracy and capitalism at home, both for moral reasons and for the practical reason that America’s free society gave it an advantage against the Soviet Union over the long term. Thus, leading supporters of containment, such as President Dwight D. Eisenhower, also supported limited government at home so that the U.S. would retain its political and economic vibrancy.

The Obama Administration has overseen unprecedented peacetime growth in the size of the federal government.²⁶ Over time, this will reduce American economic growth and, ultimately, America’s ability to outlast its adversaries. This is a fundamental break with the Cold War containment policy. Because it affects every area of American life and policy, this break is more important than any of the Administration’s foreign policy initiatives.

Containment is not a policy. At its best, “containment” summarizes a range of demanding policies—including limiting the size of government and promoting economic freedom at home—across a wide range of issues that are necessary to contain foreign adversaries, including Iran. At its worst, containment is a lullaby intended to lull the American people into ignoring their adversaries. Regrettably, it is playing that role today.

What the U.S. Should Do

The Obama Administration’s actions have inhibited efforts to contain Iran, which the United States has attempted to do with uneven and often disappointing results since 1979. Containment will become even more difficult if Iran produces nuclear weapons.

Containment requires a firm American determination to confront Iran when Iran pursues hostile policies. While containment often is trumpeted as an alternative to the use of force, it is unlikely to pro-

25. Aaron L. Friedberg, *In the Shadow of the Garrison State: America’s Anti-Statism and Its Cold War Grand Strategy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000). See also Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, p. 389.

26. Brian Riedl, “Federal Spending by the Numbers 2010,” Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 78, June 1, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/06/federal-spending-by-the-numbers-2010>.

duce a stable balance of power. Rather, it will likely require the use of force in a future crisis. In such a crisis, the United States and its allies, if they tacitly acquiesce in Iran's nuclear program, would be compelled to go to war against a nuclear-armed Iran.

The United States cannot afford to reduce its policy options to containment that fades into acquiescence or war against a nuclear-armed Iran. That is because acquiescence will fuel Iranian ambitions in a way that might lead to the nuclear war the U.S. seeks to avoid.

The U.S. therefore cannot rule out military action to stop the development of Iran's nuclear program. If the U.S. fails to present a convincing threat of military action and thus effectively acquiesces in the Iranian program, it will encourage the Iranian regime to believe that it can continue to advance without fear. The consequences of military action under any conditions would be serious, but military action forced on the U.S. or Israel by the success of Iran's nuclear weapons and missile programs would be undertaken in conditions that would make achieving success difficult and costly.²⁷

The U.S. should not grow complacent in the belief that containment will work against Iran because it worked against the Soviet Union. Such an approach ignores the experience, successes, and failures of containment during the Cold War. Moreover, containment is in essence a negative policy, a policy of playing for time. The United States can and should do more.

The fundamental problem that the U.S. and its allies face in Iran is the repressive, hostile Iranian regime. The U.S. should take the lead in identifying the Iranian regime as the problem and Iran's nuclear weapons program as the most troubling symptom of that problem. It should then take concrete steps to promote change in Iran and to protect itself and its allies until that change occurs.²⁸ These steps should include:

- **Weakening the Iranian regime's economic base.** Containment is based on the belief that totalitarian economies and governments are weaker than capitalist and democratic ones in the long term. This belief is correct. The U.S. should act on this belief by imposing and enforcing the strongest sanctions and by pressing allies to impose sanctions to restrict investment, trade, and technology transfer to Iran's oil and gas sector, which provides the bulk of the regime's income. Supporters of containment should accept and welcome such measures, which are inherent in the logic of their preferred policy. The U.S. should not tighten and loosen sanctions in response to perceived progress in negotiations with Iran. That only encourages the regime to believe that the U.S. can be manipulated.
- **Empowering and encouraging the regime's adversaries.** Containment acknowledges that the regime being contained is hostile, dangerous, and tyrannical. Such regimes make enemies of their own people. The United States should expose the regime's human rights abuses, help dissidents communicate securely with each other, aid opposition groups, and use covert actions to discredit the regime. Such measures would increase the internal and external pressure on Iran and make it clear to the regime that its nuclear ambitions and its domestic repression carry enormous costs. Again, supporters of containment should welcome such measures.
- **Restricting and reducing the regime's ability to threaten others.** Containment requires that the regime in question be confronted with the prospect of an effective U.S. military response if it breaches containment. It must also not be able to blackmail the U.S. and its allies. To that end, the U.S. should expose and restrict Iran's meddling in Iraq and Afghanistan, modernize the U.S. nuclear arsenal, expand U.S. expeditionary capabilities, and deploy a robust and compre-

27. James Phillips, "An Israeli Preventive Attack on Iran's Nuclear Sites: Implications for the U.S.," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2361, January 15, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/01/an-israeli-preventive-attack-on-iran-nuclear-sites-implications-for-the-us>.

28. James Phillips, Helle C. Dale, and Janice A. Smith, "Ten Practical Steps to Liberty in Iran," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2832, March 11, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/03/Ten-Practical-Steps-to-Liberty-in-Iran>.

hensive missile defense system. Such measures would fulfill part of the logic of containment.

Conclusion

Together, these measures would not merely contain Iran. They would follow the tradition of President Reagan by refusing to accept that the U.S. has no option but to yield to totalitarian regimes or go to war with them. Together, these options offer a richer, more optimistic vision of policy toward Iran

than the repetitious, content-free, and ill-informed mantra of containment.

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