

Boxed in

Containing a nuclear Iran

An emboldened nuclear Iran could prove destabilising to the Gulf region, and might encourage the US to adopt a containment strategy. Michael Rubin examines how prepared the US and its allies are to implement such a policy.

KEY POINTS

- With Iran continuing its nuclear programme, US policy may seek to develop an effective containment strategy.
- However, various political constraints hamper US preparations for such a strategy.
- With little political will to further the containment policy, the US is unlikely to be in a position to contain a nuclear Iran in coming years.

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Containment helped define United States foreign policy towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Inspired by a view of the USSR as expansionist and intractably opposed to capitalist states, containment was viewed as the most cost-effective method to prevent Soviet extension without resorting to cataclysmic war.

The policy was perhaps best described by US national security adviser George Kennan in his 1947 'X' article, in which he claimed "it is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies".

Yet, although the X article was written about the idiosyncracies of the Soviet system, containment is not a policy necessarily specific to the unique characteristics of the Cold War. Many in Washington currently appear to view a similar policy as

an option in its dealings with a very different but similarly ideologically opposed rival, Iran.

For the present, Washington's commitment to this policy remains partial, as other policies are being pursued to prevent Iran gaining a nuclear capability, and therefore containment is not a viable option. However, should other policies fail entirely and Iran become emboldened in its foreign policy by a nuclear status, containment is likely to characterise US policy towards the Islamic Republic.

Why contain?

Containment, at present, appears the policy option most likely to be used should all other avenues fail to defuse the international stand-off over the Islamic Republic's uranium enrichment programme. Given the lack of success that has been forthcoming from other policies, including a new incentive package from the five permanent United Nations Security Council members plus Germany, and Washington's decision to join direct discussions with Iran to resolve the disagreements, the possibility of a focus on containment is increasing.

The containment policy would not seek to deter use of nuclear weapons by Iran or its allies. Washington believes itself able to deter Tehran from the use of nuclear weapons with its own advanced, extensive and secure nuclear arsenal. Rather, containment would attempt to prevent an Iran emboldened by nuclear weapons from using its proxies or conventional forces in regional operations to extend the country's influence.

The range of possible regional operations is significant, largely owing to the unstable international politics of the Gulf region. Beyond the possible use of Iranian proxies in Iraq and

Lebanon, three Persian Gulf islands disputed with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunb islands – remain longstanding flashpoints. Moreover, Hossein Shariatmadari, appointed to the editorship of the hardline Iranian daily Kayhan by Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, raised regional anxiety with a 9 July 2007 editorial suggesting that the island of Bahrain should, after almost five centuries of separation, return to Iranian control, while the member states of the Gulf Co-operation Council (Kuwait, Oman, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar), remain concerned about Iranian statements over Tehran's ability to close the Strait of Hormuz.

This does not indicate that such conflict is likely, nor that Tehran harbours expansionist tendencies or an irrepressible desire for expeditionary operations, but it does reflect a clear range of possible conflict areas in the region.

Given these scenarios, it is unsurprising that the US might seek to rely on an approach that underpinned US strategy during the Cold War. To succeed in an Iranian context, any containment would necessarily rely on three factors: troop deployments and US bases overseas, weapons sales to countries surrounding Iran, and diplomatic alliances. However, political constraints, regional sensitivities and concern over dealing with some regional regimes are all hindering US preparations for a containment strategy, and hence Washington's ability to enforce containment is currently limited.

Base desires

In terms of US bases, there is already a demonstrable trend towards containment. US forces surround Iran, with a total of between 200,000 and

250,000 troops in Iraq, Afghanistan, the six Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) states and Turkey. Although President George W Bush announced a drawdown of 8,000 troops from Iraq on 9 September, he simultaneously outlined an increase of 4,500 personnel in Afghanistan, demonstrating that even as the Iraq deployment winds down amid US domestic pressure, Washington remains militarily committed to the region around Iran.

However, while these operations appear to field a formidable aggregate force, in reality the majority of these troops are already engaged in operations related to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Moreover, many of the facilities used by the US are both temporary in nature and subject to rigorous political control by regional states. Since the US presence in Saudi Arabia became a rallying point for Islamist militants, for example, the Kuwaiti government imposed strict regulations on the movement of US military personnel stationed in their country. For example, US troops are not allowed to visit tourist sites or markets in Kuwait except on periodic, escorted group tours. The Kuwaiti government also designates portions of Camp Arifjan as temporary and insists that when US forces depart, no trace of their presence should remain. In practice, this means that US officers must spend weeks engaging the Kuwaiti bureaucracy if they wish to pave a road through their tent city.

Similarly, while the US military and Oman maintain a façade of co-operation, the Omani leadership undermined US confidence in its reliability when, at the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, it withheld permission for several days for the US Air Force to conduct operations against the Taliban from airfields on Omani territory because of its desire to preserve

the appearance of neutrality in a conflict involving co-religionists.

Qatar's importance to the US has grown since the 1995 palace coup that installed Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa ath-Thani. The US Al-Udeid base is now perhaps the most important in the region, but it alone cannot sustain a containment strategy. Nor does any containment mission have the depth provided by active Saudi participation. Most US military departed Prince Sultan Air Base, 80 km south of Riyadh, only five years ago, leaving facility maintenance and upgrade in the hands of Saudi officials whose standards may not be up to US military requirements.

Beyond the GCC states, Iraq would be vital in any containment of Iran given its extensive frontier. However, while many members of the US Congress support containment of Iran as an alternative to military action, their opposition to upgrading US facilities inside Iraq – such as the Kirkuk and Tallil Air Bases – has undermined the implementation of the containment policy they claim to support. Protracted US-Iraq negotiations over the Status of Forces Agreement have also hampered any containment strategy and muted most debate among defence planners and within the US Congress with regard to the wisdom of permanent bases inside Iraq. While the US and Iraq are likely ultimately to agree on a continued US presence, at least until 2011, the expected gradual drawdown of troops, likely to be hastened should Barack Obama win the US presidential elections, suggests that the ability to effect containment will also gradually diminish.

Another neighbour of Iran, Turkey, could also be a vital lynchpin in any US containment strategy, particularly given its membership in NATO. Yet few US officials presently consider Turkey as a

A US F-16 Falcon takes off from a Kuwaiti air base in March 2003 in support of the US-led invasion of Iraq. Despite having numerous bases in and around the Gulf, the US remains under-prepared for a containment policy.

reliable ally in times of regional conflict, primarily owing to the ruling Justice and Development Party's refusal to join the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the sensitivity of 2007 negotiations over renewal of the US lease of portions of Incirlik Air Base, near Adana. In the latter example, the key question about renewal was in relation to Ankara's demand that it could veto missions originating from the facility, especially when they might involve Iraq and Iran. Recent Turkish overtures toward Iran and the Turkish government's unwillingness to join sanctions against the Islamic Republic have further heightened US concern. While the upper reaches of the Turkish General Staff may still be pro-US, no US planner relies on Turkey as a keystone in containment of Iran.

Finally, Pakistan, bordering Iran to the east, while long a nominal US ally, will not participate actively in containing Iran due to its own instability, its orientation to counter perceived threats from India and its involvement in Afghanistan.

Arms transfers

These various political restrictions to basing rights hinder levels of US troops in the region, and therefore any attempts to prepare for containment. Any serious containment strategy would likely require more than the number of US troops currently permanently stationed in the Persian Gulf, many of whom only serve support functions. This suggests other policies must be implemented to augment the meagre US troops based in the region.

To contain Iran effectively would require upgrading regional facilities to expedite deployment in the event of hostility; deploying advanced anti-aircraft weaponry around regional states' economic assets – such as oil fields and industrial infrastructure – which would likely be targets of

an Iranian first or retaliatory strike; and, perhaps most significantly, upgrading regional military forces to wage war independently against Iran for several days until the Pentagon could send reinforcements to the region.

The importance of equipping local allies to 'hold the fort' becomes apparent when analysing the strategic balance in the region. At present, US regional allies neither have the troops nor the materiel to contain Iran. The Islamic Republic has 660,000 troops spread among the regular military, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), and the paramilitary Basij (which in September 2007 was nominally folded into the IRGC proper). Saudi Arabia has approximately 215,000 personnel, including paramilitaries, and the other GCC states add another 144,000 combined. Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan bring another 102,000 troops. Turkey has approximately 514,000 active military personnel, but the current Turkish leadership is unlikely to allow these to be used beyond containment of threats – largely from Kurdish militants – along its own 499 km frontier with Iran. While the US has invested billions in the Iraqi and Afghan militaries, both are inwardly focused and ill-prepared to counter any external threat.

In terms of materiel, Iran is the single leading military power in the Gulf, although largely holds parity in comparison to the other regional powers in aggregate. Saudi Arabia and the smaller GCC states maintain approximately 1,900 main battle tanks versus 1,700 in Iran. Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan add another 810. Iran, meanwhile, maintains the lead in its navy: 200 vessels including four submarines, versus just over 100 vessels for the entire GCC.

Iran has a quantitative lead over Saudi Arabia in combat aircraft numbers – 330 against 240 – although Saudi Arabia has a qualitative edge since

its F-15s remains superior to Iran's MiG-29s and Su-24s in an air-to-air capacity. However, Iran has a superior ballistic missile capability to any immediate neighbours besides Pakistan. Iran's Shahab-3 missile has performed erratically during tests, but now reportedly has a 2,000 km range.

Given this military balance, the US is eager to bolster indigenous GCC military capability and missile defences, improve interoperability and enhance protection of critical infrastructure. In order to achieve this goal, the Bush administration in May 2006 launched a new Gulf Security Dialogue, which includes a series of arms sales to upgrade regional military capabilities, particularly GCC anti-missile capabilities.

In December 2007, for example, the Department of Defense notified Congress of the UAE's intention to purchase 288 Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) air defence missiles and 216 PAC-2 Guidance Enhanced missiles and of Kuwait's intention to purchase 80 PAC-3s and kits to upgrade 60 earlier generation PAC-2s.

Saudi forces have earlier generation Patriot batteries and during the past several months have received advanced medium-range air-to-air AIM-120C5 missiles ordered in 2006. While these may not provide protection from Iranian missiles, they do provide deterrence against any potential Iranian manned or unmanned aerial assault on Saudi oil infrastructure.

The US installed missile defence emplacements in Qatar as it built Al-Udeid and took armour and heavy equipment to the peninsular country. Turkey is also considering the PAC-3 along with other anti-missile systems manufactured in Israel and Russia. However, Turkey's procurement process is slow in comparison to other NATO countries, and more vulnerable to political complications.

Yet while such advanced equipment can pro-

Regional military balance in the Gulf

	Service personnel	Fighter aircraft	Main battle tanks	Combat vessels
Azerbaijan	72,100	79	110	41
Bahrain	11,000	29	140	1
Iran	663,000*	332	1,710	201
Iraq	162,358	0	127	11
Kuwait	15,700	50	293	0
Oman	39,700	43	117	8
Qatar	12,400	9	30	7
Saudi Arabia	214,500**	242	765	72
Turkey	514,000	376	4,406	84
Turkmenistan	30,000	58	702	21
UAE	65,400	123	567	6

*Includes 175,000 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps personnel and 90,000 Basij militia.

**Includes 16,000 air defence personnel and 90,000 Saudi Arabian National Guard personnel

Note: Fighter aircraft does not include rotary wing aircraft. Source: Jane's Sentinel Country Risk Assessments

wide regional militaries with a qualitative edge over Iranian forces, again political restrictions exist that will prevent the sale of sensitive equipment. In particular, a traditional desire for Israel to retain a qualitative edge in technology over any real or potential adversaries hampers any attempt to arm regional states. In practice, determinations over arms sales to moderate Arab states are scattered throughout the US executive branch.

The Department of State's Office of Political-Military Affairs supervises weapons sales and exports. The National Disclosure Policy Committee, comprising the secretaries of state and defence, the secretaries of each armed service and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, vets the release of sensitive weapons technology. The intelligence community inputs into both bodies. Lastly, Israeli military officials meet their Pentagon counterparts at the Department of Defense's annual Joint Political Military Group meeting, during which Tel Aviv can voice concern about their adversaries' capabilities.

Even when the executive branch deem weapons sales to moderate Arab states permissible, Congress often intervenes to derail sales of advanced weaponry to Arab states. Most famously, this occurred with the failed attempt to cancel a 1981 sale of advanced airborne early warning and control systems aircraft to Saudi Arabia, but more recently Congress has intervened to sidetrack sales of Joint Direct Attack Munitions technology to Saudi Arabia, even as the Bush administration approved their sale to the UAE, Oman, and Israel.

As US Army Lt Col William Wunderle and US Air Force Lt Col Andre Briere argue in a Winter 2008 *Middle East Quarterly* article, any strategy to contain a nuclear Iran will require the US government and Congress to rethink and reformulate calculations on restrictions to arms sales in the region, based on the understanding that the GCC states represent the front line of Israeli defence against a mutual Iranian threat and that no GCC state itself poses a serious threat to Israeli security. Still, such a shift is highly politically sensitive.

Beyond the military procurement, training is equally important to improve the ability of regional military forces to act autonomously. Here, regional military forces vary in their preparedness. Saudi reluctance to host foreign forces in its territory hampers its contribution to containment and to the protection of its critical infrastructure such as the Jubail, Ras Juaymah, and Ras Tannurah refineries in the Eastern province, and the East-West crude oil pipeline (Petroline), which bisects the country and ends at the Red Sea port of Yanbu.

While it is hard to gauge the current ability of the Kuwaiti or Qatari militaries to operate independently, their ability to operate equipment and air defences independently has increased through the current decade with training and exercises.

US forces in and around the Gulf

The US maintains approximately 162,000 troops in Iraq, about 33,000 troops in Afghanistan, another 23,000 support personnel permanently stationed in Kuwait (with perhaps up to 15,000 troops transiting or temporarily based there) and approximately 2,500 troops combined within the other five GCC states. An additional 25,000 sailors serve with the US Fifth Fleet, who are headquartered at the Naval Support Activity in Bahrain, an awkward name designed to bypass the political complications of acknowledging it to be a permanent base. The US Navy also uses the port of Jebel Ali, 35 km southwest of Dubai, a dockyard that can accommodate US aircraft carriers.

The US Air Force has access to facilities in each GCC country, including Bahrain's Sheikh Isa Air Base; Al-Dhafra Air Base in the UAE – a refuelling hub both for Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi

Freedom; and Oman's Seeb International Airport, Masirah Air Base, Thumrait Air Base and Musnanah Air Base. The Sultan of Oman has also allowed the US Air Force to store munitions in Oman. Qatar, meanwhile, hosts US Central Command's forward headquarters at its al-Udeid Air Base, and also allows the US army to preposition armour and heavy equipment at Camp as-Sayliyah. While few US troops remain in Saudi Arabia, the kingdom hosts a small Combined Air Operations Centre. Approximately one third of Kuwait is now a closed military zone and home to US military camps or operating bases. The main base, Camp Arifjan, is the gateway for US forces entering Iraq. US aircraft also utilise facilities at Ali al-Salem Air Base.

The US also maintains about 1,500 air force personnel in Turkey at Incirlik airbase.

Unappealing diplomacy

One further constraint on US containment strategy is its unwillingness to engage fully with regional regimes.

President George W Bush has since 2002 made democratisation a cornerstone of his policy toward the Middle East. His administration's focus on reform and transformational diplomacy complicated relations with longstanding Arab allies such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, although long-established relationships as well as the desire to win Arab state support for US operations in Iraq muted the democracy agenda within the Department of State's Near East Affairs Bureau.

This has ensured relative continuity in US diplomatic engagement with the Arab states, but has endangered or transformed relations with other states.

US criticism of Uzbekistan's human rights violations led the Uzbek government to demand the departure of US forces in 2005 from the air base at Karshi-Khanabad, which had supported the mission in Afghanistan and is well suited to support containment efforts against the Islamic Republic.

Azerbaijan would be on the front line of any containment effort against Iran. However, US concerns over Azerbaijan's commitment to reform and democracy could hamper military partnership. On 29 July 2008, Assistant Secretary of State David Kramer expressed worries about the state of democracy in Azerbaijan, a concern which will grow ahead of Azerbaijan's October 2008 presidential elections, and linked progress on democratisation to the broader US-Azerbaijan bilateral relationship.

Contain or restrain?

With negotiations over Iran's nuclear enrich-

ment deadlocked and widespread recognition in both Europe and the US of the difficulties and complication of military strikes against Iran, US policy makers increasingly say they are prepared to contain Iran. However, implementation of a containment policy remains uneven. While the Gulf Security Dialogue will advance GCC military capabilities, no GCC country with the possible exception of Saudi Arabia appears able to withstand an Iranian attack.

Neither the Bush administration, candidates to succeed him, nor Congress have yet proposed streamlining of the weapons procurement process, augmenting deployments of forces, especially air force and navy, to the region, upgrading of existing facilities, establishing new bases, or re-prioritising security and democracy concerns along Iran's northern flank. This suggests that the US currently remains ill prepared for any containment strategy, and is unlikely to be in a position to effectively contain a nuclear Iran in coming years. ■

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