

Dual Containment: Revive It or Replace It?

by [Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Dec 18, 1997

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Patrick Clawson \(/experts/patrick-clawson\)](/experts/patrick-clawson)

Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



Brief Analysis

Washington must face the problem that both the large powers in the Persian Gulf-Iraq and Iraq-have regimes unwilling to live in peace with their neighbors or the United States. Several approaches to these vexatious regimes tried by the West have been unsuccessful. Both the reliance on a regional power to sustain peace and the promotion of a balance of power among warring countries ended in disaster. Europe and Japan tried engaging Iran with tens of billions in loans, but got little dividend. The failure of past strategies led the Clinton administration to conclude that the United States must guarantee the security of the Persian Gulf. That is the essence of dual containment: to deter or repel aggression by these two states while awaiting the change in regime that is sure to come because the current regimes are unable to address the needs of their peoples.

Internal dissension in both Iran and Iraq will eventually result in the change of both regimes. Though severe repression and reliance on a tight circle of family and associates ensure the immediate security of Saddam's regime, they also ensure the eventual demise of the present system. In Iran, the election of President Khatemi in May displayed a youth disaffected by social restrictions, poor economic prospects and corruption. Furthermore, the Islamic republic is threatened by the alienation of its most senior pious clergy (as distinct from the political clergy), some of whom called for supreme religious leader Khomeini to relinquish part of his authority to Ayatollah Montazeri.

While the United States awaits the collapse of the Iranian and Iraqi regimes, it remains confident in its ability to deter and repel aggression by either government. While there are differences among the international community about how to relate to these rogue regimes, there is a consensus about the need to prevent the most aggressive acts possible by either Iraq or Iran, namely, if Iraqi invaded Kuwait or employed weapons of mass destruction or if Iran blocked the Strait of Hormuz.

Some have argued against dual containment stating that the U.S. military presence required to deter aggressions on the part of Iraq or Iran destabilizes the Gulf monarchies. This concern is misplaced. Indeed, thanks to modern technology, the United States does not need large military bases such as it has in Europe and East Asia to preserve the security of the Gulf. Under the umbrella offered by American protection, some GCC governments have begun to

make overtures to Iran and Iraq. This is because dual containment is a victim of its own success. That is not surprising behavior for small states receiving protection from a large neighbor by a distant superpower. The United States' will and ability to check external aggression has led to complacency about the threat posed by Iraq and Iran.

Dual containment can be revived and strengthened by following four suggestions:

- Proclaim the change of the two regimes as the desired goal of U.S. policy.
- Engage the people of Iraq and Iran, irrespective of governments.
- Explore the confidence-building measures of moving to a more defensive military posture.
- Seek UN imprimatur less frequently for U.S. actions in the Gulf; share responsibility for Gulf decision-making with other countries in proportion to their tangible contributions to Gulf security, with a focus on the key roles of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Great Britain.

It has been argued that instead of dual containment, the United States should focus solely on containing Iraq while easing on Iran. This would be an error. If there was such a dramatic shift in U.S. policy, the GCC states would understandably become concerned about U.S. reliability, even about Iraq itself. Plus, if the Gulf monarchies witness Iran gaining strength and the United States vacillating, they may decide to accommodate Saddam to preserve their national interests. Also, the same forces arguing for engaging Iran—namely, the French and Russian governments and some U.S. oil interests—would make the same argument regarding Iraq. In short, it is not feasible to contain Iraq while engaging Iran.

CHAS FREEMAN

Balance of power is the best guarantee of security in the Gulf. When the Iran/Iraq war left Iran weakened, Iraq felt emboldened to commit transgressions against its neighbors which in turn led to the Gulf War. At the end of that war, the U.S. objective—in addition to the UN's core objective of expelling Iraqi from Kuwait—was to restore the balance of power by reducing the size of Iraqi forces. Saddam Hussein's military defeat did not lead to his political humiliation and subsequent removal, and his conflict with the United States continues. Because of the dual containment policy, power in the region remains unbalanced. As a result, the United States must maintain a permanent force in the region as a deterrent to both Iran and Iraq. In Iran, dual containment leaves the United States waiting for the erosion of revolutionary fervor and the unlikely collapse of the regime. In Iraq, it leaves the United States waiting for change in Baghdad with no plan to achieve it.

The United States continues to ignore political strategy in its approach to these two states. Through purely military means, it is attempting to eliminate Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and would like to see the same in Iran. This leaves GCC states, which Washington is trying to protect, dissatisfied with the poor results of U.S. efforts and uncomfortable with the open-ended deployment of U.S. forces in the region. Saddam has consolidated his position; Iran has not been isolated.

The purpose of maintaining Iraqi sanctions with virtually no likelihood they would ever be lifted is unclear. The only visible result of the sanctions is the suffering of the Iraqi people, which is a focus of opposition to the policy of dual containment by members of the Gulf War coalition. Sanctions can only be effective if the conditions under which they will cease are established. The marginal utility of the UNSCOM inspections is declining; it is evident that support for the continuation of the inspection regime has deteriorated. The argument made by Washington that sanctions must be continued in order to support the UN is diminished by the U.S. failure to pay its UN dues. And the strong U.S. stance on what Iraq must do is undercut by its failure to apply pressure regarding the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The United States should move away from its policy of dual containment to a differentiated policy towards Iraq and

Iran. With respect to Iraq, the policy should aim at the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Here, it is vital to distinguish between the Iraqi people and Saddam. The Iraqis must be told with certainty that if Saddam were no longer in power, Iraq would be relieved of its international isolation: sanctions would be lifted and Iraq be reintegrated as a part of the international community. With regard to Iran, the policy should be engagement in a wary dialogue with the Iranian people and authorities in order to strengthen the position of those in Tehran who are arguing for a more sensible policy toward the West.

◆ This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Stephanie Sines.

Policy #290

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Iraq \(/policy-analysis/iraq\)](#)