

The Costs of Containing Iran

Washington's Misguided New Middle East Policy

By Vali Nasr and Ray Takeyh

From *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2008

Summary: The Bush administration wants to contain Iran by rallying the support of Sunni Arab states and now sees Iran's containment as the heart of its Middle East policy: a way to stabilize Iraq, declaw Hezbollah, and restart the Arab-Israeli peace process. But the strategy is unsound and impractical, and it will probably further destabilize an already volatile region.

Vali Nasr, Professor of International Politics at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and Adjunct Senior Fellow for the Middle East at the Council on Foreign Relations, is the author of "The Shia Revival: How Conflicts Within Islam Will Shape the Future." Ray Takeyh is a Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author of "Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic."

Over the past year, Washington has come to see the containment of Iran as the primary objective of its Middle East policy. It holds Tehran responsible for rising violence in Iraq and Afghanistan, Lebanon's tribulations, and Hamas' intransigence and senses that the balance of power in the region is shifting toward Iran and its Islamist allies. Curbing Tehran's growing influence is thus necessary for regional security.

Vice President Dick Cheney announced this new direction last May on the deck of the U.S.S. John C. Stennis in the Persian Gulf. "We'll stand with our friends in opposing extremism and strategic threats," Cheney said. "We'll continue bringing relief to those who suffer, and delivering justice to the enemies of freedom. And we'll stand with others to prevent Iran from gaining nuclear weapons and dominating this region." Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has expressed a similar sentiment: "Iran constitutes the single most important single-country strategic challenge to the United States and to the kind of Middle East that we want to see." Meanwhile, Iran's accelerating nuclear program continues to haunt Washington and much of the international community, adding to their sense of urgency.

Taking a page out of its early Cold War playbook, Washington hopes to check and possibly reduce Tehran's growing influence much as it foiled the Soviet Union's expansionist designs: by projecting its own power while putting direct pressure on its enemy and building a broad-based alliance against it. Washington has been building up the U.S. Navy's presence in the Persian Gulf and using harsh rhetoric, raising the specter of war. At the same time, it funds a \$75 million democracy-promotion program supporting regime change in Tehran. In recent months, Washington has rallied support for a series of United Nations resolutions against Iran's nuclear program and successfully pushed through tough informal financial sanctions that have all but cut Iran out of international financial markets. It has officially designated the Iranian Revolutionary Guards as a proliferator of weapons of mass destruction and the IRG's elite al Quds Army as a supporter of terrorism, allowing the Treasury Department to target the groups' assets and the U.S. military to harass and apprehend their personnel in Iraq. Washington is also working to garner support from what it now views as moderate governments in the Middle East -- mostly authoritarian Arab regimes it once blamed for the region's myriad problems.

Washington's goal is to eliminate Iran's influence in the Arab world by rolling back Tehran's gains to date and denying it the support of allies -- in effect drawing a line from Lebanon to Oman to separate Iran from its Arab neighbors. The Bush administration has rallied support among Arab governments to oppose Iranian policies in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories. It is trying to buttress the military capability of Persian Gulf states by providing a \$20 billion arms package to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf emirates. According to Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, one of the arms sales' primary objectives is "to enable these countries to strengthen their defenses and therefore to provide a deterrence against Iranian expansion and Iranian aggression in the future." And through a series of regional conclaves and conferences, the Bush administration

hopes to rejuvenate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process partly in the hope of refocusing the energies of the region's governments on the threat posed by Iran.

Containing Iran is not a novel idea, of course, but the benefits Washington expects from it are new. Since the inception of the Islamic Republic, successive Republican and Democratic administrations have devised various policies, doctrines, and schemes to temper the rash theocracy. For the Bush administration, however, containing Iran is the solution to the Middle East's various problems. In its narrative, Sunni Arab states will rally to assist in the reconstruction of a viable government in Iraq for fear that state collapse in Baghdad would only consolidate Iran's influence there. The specter of Shiite primacy in the region will persuade Saudi Arabia and Egypt to actively help declear Hezbollah. And, the theory goes, now that Israel and its longtime Arab nemeses suddenly have a common interest in deflating Tehran's power and stopping the ascendance of its protégé, Hamas, they will come to terms on an Israeli-Palestinian accord. This, in turn, will (rightly) shift the Middle East's focus away from the corrosive Palestinian issue to the more pressing Persian menace. Far from worrying that the Middle East is now in flames, Bush administration officials seem to feel that in the midst of disorder and chaos lies an unprecedented opportunity for reshaping the region so that it is finally at ease with U.S. dominance and Israeli prowess.

But there is a problem: Washington's containment strategy is unsound, it cannot be implemented effectively, and it will probably make matters worse. The ingredients needed for a successful containment effort simply do not exist. Under these circumstances, Washington's insistence that Arab states array against Iran could further destabilize an already volatile region.

NEW AND DISPROVED

Iran does present serious problems for the United States. Its quest for a nuclear capability, its mischievous interventions in Iraq, and its strident opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process constitute a formidable list of grievances. But the bigger issue is the Bush administration's fundamental belief that Iran cannot be a constructive actor in a stable Middle East and that its unsavory behavior cannot be changed through creative diplomacy. Iran is not, in fact, seeking to create disorder in order to fulfill some scriptural promise, nor is it an expansionist power with unquenchable ambitions. Not unlike Russia and China, Iran is a growing power seeking to become a pivotal state in its region.

Another one of Washington's errors is to assume that Iran can be handled like the Soviet Union and that the Cold War model applies to the Middle East. Both Israel and Arab governments have pressed Washington to contend with Iran's nuclear ambitions and since the Lebanon war of 2006 have worried about the strengthening connections between Tehran and Hezbollah. They have responded by throwing their support behind the government of Fouad Siniora in Beirut and trying to break the collusion between the Iranian and Syrian governments. Washington has been supportive, building up its military presence in the Persian Gulf and using last year's surge in the number of U.S. forces in Iraq to roll back Iran's gains there. But the same Arab governments that complain about Tehran's influence also oppose the Shiite government in Iraq, which is pro-Iranian and pro-American, and favor its Sunni opponents -- leaving Washington having to figure out how to work with the Iraqi government while also building a regional alliance with Sunni Arab states. Washington's containment wall will therefore have to run right through Iraq and so inevitably destabilize the country as it becomes the frontline in the U.S.-Iranian confrontation.

The Bush administration's strategy also fails to appreciate the diverse views of Arab states. Arab regimes are indeed worried about Iran, but they are not uniformly so. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain decry Iranian expansionism and fear Tehran's interference in their internal affairs. But Egypt and Jordan worry mostly that Iran's newfound importance is eroding their standing in the region. The stake for them is not territory or internal stability but influence over the Palestinian issue. Even within the Persian Gulf region, there is no anti-Iranian consensus. Unlike Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, for example, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates do not suffer a Shiite minority problem and have enjoyed extensive economic relations with Tehran since the mid-1990s. Far

from seeking confrontation with Iran, they fear the consequences of escalating tensions between it and the United States. Even U.S. allies in the Middle East will assess their capabilities and vulnerabilities, shape their alliances, and pursue their interests with the understanding that they, too, are susceptible to Iran's influence. A U.S. containment strategy that assumes broad Arab solidarity is unsound in theory.

Nor can it be implemented. For close to half a century, the Arab world saw Iraq's military as its bulwark in the Persian Gulf. Having dismantled that force in 2003, the United States is now the only power present in the Gulf that can contain Iran militarily. Shouldering that responsibility effectively would mean maintaining large numbers of troops in the region indefinitely. But given the anti-American sentiment pervading all of the Gulf today, none of the states in the region (except for Kuwait) could countenance the redeployment of a substantial number of U.S. forces in their territory. Thus, Washington would have to rely on weaker regional actors to contain a rising Iran, which is the largest country in the Persian Gulf in terms of size, population, and economy. Even major arms sales to the Gulf states could not change this reality.

Washington's reliance on reviving the Middle East peace process as the linchpin of its strategy to contain Iran is also problematic. Bush administration officials are assuming that resumed diplomacy between Israel and its neighbors will assuage the Arab street, rally Arab governments behind the United States, and lay the groundwork for a united Arab-Israeli front against Iran. But this hope disregards the fact that in their current state, Palestinian and Israeli politics will not support the types of compromises necessary for a credible breakthrough. Both Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas are too weak to press their constituencies toward the painful concessions that a viable peace compact would require. The expectations of Arab leaders far exceed those of Israel and the United States: while they have been openly demanding final-status negotiations, Secretary Rice has been talking only about creating momentum toward peace.

Even if the peace process can be successfully relaunched, the notion that Arabs see the rise of Iran as a bigger problem than the decades-old Arab-Israeli conflict is misplaced. After years of enmity, the Arab masses and Arab opinion-makers continue to perceive Israel as a more acute threat. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad understands this well: he has been raising the heat on the Palestinian issue precisely because he wants to make headway among the Arab people and understands that they do not share the anti-Iranian sentiment of their governments. Along with his inflammatory denunciations of Israel and Tehran's assistance to Hamas and Hezbollah, Ahmadinejad's embrace of an Arab cause has garnered him ample support among the rank and file. In fact, Tehran enjoys significant soft power in the Middle East today. Washington assumes that its proposals regarding the Arab-Israeli peace process will redirect everyone's worries toward Iran; Tehran believes that current efforts will not satiate Arab demands. A careful reading of the region's mood reveals that Iran is on firmer ground than the United States.

Indeed, it is not the Palestinian issue that will decide the balance of power in the Middle East but the fate of the failing states of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon, where Iranian influence has found ample room to expand. The Palestinian issue remains important to Israel's security, stability in the Levant, and the United States' image and prestige. It is also a catalyst for regional rivalries. But the Palestinian issue is not the original cause of those regional contests, nor will it decide their outcome. For all its worrying about Iran's growing power, Washington has failed to appreciate that the center of gravity in the Middle East has indeed shifted from the Levant to the Persian Gulf. It is now more likely that peace and stability in the Persian Gulf would bring peace and stability to the Levant than the other way around.

For a government that so often invokes the past to substantiate its policies, the Bush administration has a curiously inadequate grasp of recent Middle Eastern history. The last time the United States rallied the Arab world to contain Iran, in the 1980s, Americans ended up with a radicalized Sunni political culture that eventually yielded al Qaeda. The results may be as bad this time around: a containment policy will only help erect Sunni extremism as an ideological barrier to Shiite Iran, much as Saudi Arabia's rivalry with Iran in the 1980s played out in South Asia and much as radical Salafis mobilized to offset Hezbollah's soaring popularity

after the Israeli-Lebanese war in 2006. During the Cold War, confronting communism meant promoting capitalism and democracy. Containing Iran today would mean promoting Sunni extremism -- a self-defeating proposition for Washington.

The realities of the Middle East will eventually defeat Washington's Cold War fantasies. This is not to say that Iran does not pose serious challenges to U.S., Arab, or Israeli interests. But envisioning that a grand U.S.-Arab-Israeli alliance can contain Iran will sink Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon into greater chaos; inflame Islamic radicalism; and commit the United States to a lengthy and costly presence in the Middle East.

A NEW ORDER

The Middle East is a region continuously divided against itself. In the 1960s, radical Arab regimes contested the legitimacy and power of traditional monarchical states. In the 1970s, Islamic fundamentalists rejected the prevailing secular order and sought to set the region on the path to God. In the 1980s, much of the Arab world supported the genocidal Saddam Hussein as he sought to displace Iran's theocratic regime. Today, the Middle East is fracturing once more, this time along sectarian and confessional lines, with Sunnis clamoring to curb Shiite ascendance. Again and again, in the name of preserving the balance of power, U.S. policy has taken sides in the region's conflicts, thus exacerbating tensions and widening existing cleavages. Beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict, the United States has shown limited interest in mediating conflicts, settling disputes, or bringing antagonists together. Washington sided with the conservative monarchies against Arab socialist republics, acquiesced in the brutal suppression of fundamentalist opposition by secular governments, buttressed Saudi power and the Iraqi war machine to temper Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamist rage. It is now courting Sunni regimes to align against Iran and its resurgent Shiite allies. Every time, as Washington has become mired in the Middle East's rivalries, its goal of stabilizing the region has slipped further away.

Instead of focusing on restoring a former balance of power, the United States would be wise to aim for regional integration and foster a new framework in which all the relevant powers would have a stake in a stable status quo. The Bush administration is correct to sense that a truculent Iran poses serious challenges to U.S. concerns, but containing Iran through military deployment and antagonistic alliances simply is not a tenable strategy. Iran is not, despite common depictions, a messianic power determined to overturn the regional order in the name of Islamic militancy; it is an unexceptionally opportunistic state seeking to assert predominance in its immediate neighborhood. Thus, the task at hand for Washington is to create a situation in which Iran will find benefit in limiting its ambitions and in abiding by international norms.

Dialogue, compromise, and commerce, as difficult as they may be, are convincing means. An acknowledgment by the U.S. government that Tehran does indeed have legitimate interests and concerns in Iraq could get the two governments finally to realize that they have similar objectives: both want to preserve the territorial integrity of Iraq and prevent the civil war there from engulfing the Middle East. Resuming diplomatic and economic relations between Iran and the United States, as well as collaborating on Iraq, could also be the precursor of an eventual arrangement subjecting Iran's nuclear program to its obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. If Iran enjoyed favorable security and commercial ties with the United States and was at ease in its region, it might restrain its nuclear ambitions.

Engaging Tehran need not come at the expense of the United States' relationships with Iran's Arab neighbors. Instead of militarizing the Persian Gulf and shoring up shaky alliances on Iran's periphery, Washington should move toward a new regional security system. The system should feature all the local actors and could rest on, among other things, a treaty pledging the inviolability of the region's borders, arms control pacts proscribing certain categories of weapons, a common market with free-trade zones, and a mechanism for adjudicating disputes. For the Gulf states, this new order would have the advantage of bringing the Shiite-dominated states of Iran and Iraq into a constructive partnership, thus diminishing the risk of sectarian conflict. A new security arrangement would be an opportunity for Iran to legitimize its power and achieve its objectives through cooperation rather than confrontation. And it would allow the Iraqi government, which is often belittled by its

Sunni neighbors, to exercise its own influence and so expose the canard that it is a mere subsidiary of Tehran. Saudi Arabia and Iran, the region's two leading nations, could move beyond their zero-sum competition in Iraq and press their allies there to adopt a new national compact that would recognize the interests of the Sunni and Kurdish minorities in Iraq.

None of this, however, will come about without active U.S. participation and encouragement. The Persian Gulf states will require reassurance if they are to entrust their defense to a new regional order. For Iran, whose chief competitor for regional preeminence remains the United States, there would be no reason to participate unless Washington were involved. The United States, for its part, would have to show that it is seeking not to impose a new balance of power but to uphold a regional arrangement that all the relevant regimes can endorse.

Ultimately, the paradoxical but beneficial result would be a new situation in which all the Persian Gulf states would not just cooperate with one another but also endorse the United States' continued presence in the region. The strategy would serve the interests of the United States' European allies as well as those of China and Russia, all of which require stability in the Middle East and reliable access to its energy supplies.

Engaging Iran while regulating its rising power within an inclusive regional security arrangement is the best way of stabilizing Iraq, placating the United States' Arab allies, helping along the Arab-Israeli peace process, and even giving a new direction to negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. Because this approach includes all the relevant players, it is also the most sustainable and the least taxing strategy for the United States in the Middle East.