Debate

Confronting Backlash States

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A GROUP OF OUTLAWS

THE END of the Cold War and the emergence of newly independent states in eastern Europe have the potential to enlarge dramatically the family of nations now committed to the pursuit of democratic institutions, the expansion of free markets, the peaceful settlement of conflict and the promotion of collective security. For the sake of both its interests and its ideals, the United States has a special responsibility to nurture and promote these core values. As the president made clear in his State of the Union address, much of the Clinton Administration's foreign policy is devoted to that effort.

At the same time, our policy must face the reality of recalcitrant and outlaw states that not only choose to remain outside the family but also assault its basic values. There are few "backlash" states: Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Iraq and Libya. For now they lack the resources of a superpower, which would enable them to seriously threaten the democratic order being created around them. Nevertheless, their behavior is often aggressive and defiant. The ties between them are growing as they seek to thwart or quarantine themselves from a global trend to which they seem incapable of adapting.

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These backlash states have some common characteristics. Ruled by cliques that control power through coercion, they suppress basic human rights and promote radical ideologies. While their political systems vary, their leaders share a common antipathy toward popular participation that might undermine the existing regimes. These nations exhibit a chronic inability to engage constructively with the outside world, and they do not function effectively in alliances—even with those like-minded. They are often on the defensive, increasingly criticized and targeted with sanctions in international forums.

Finally, they share a siege mentality. Accordingly, they are embarked on ambitious and costly military programs—especially in weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and missile delivery systems—in a misguided quest for a great equalizer to protect their regimes or advance their purposes abroad.

As the sole superpower, the United States has a special responsibility for developing a strategy to neutralize, contain and, through selective pressure, perhaps eventually transform these backlash states into constructive members of the international community. Each backlash state is unique in its history, culture and circumstances, and U.S. strategy has been tailored accordingly. But there are common denominators. In each case, we maintain alliances and deploy military capabilities sufficient to deter or respond to any aggressive act. We seek to contain the influence of these states, sometimes by isolation, sometimes through pressure, sometimes by diplomatic and economic measures. We encourage the rest of the international community to join us in a concerted effort. In the cases of Iraq and Libya, for example, we have already achieved a strong international consensus backed by U.N. resolutions.

The United States is also actively engaged in unilateral and multilateral efforts to restrict their military and technological capabilities. Intelligence, counterterrorism and multilateral export control policies, especially on weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems, are all being employed. In the North Korean case, for example, its nuclear program is our most urgent concern. The prospect of a nuclear-armed North Korea poses extraordinary risks to our security interests in Asia and the integrity of the global nonproliferation
A defiant bunch

regime. The U.S. military commitment to the security of South Korea is unshakable. America is leading an international effort to persuade North Korea to reverse course. At the same time, we have made it clear to Pyongyang that if it resolves international concerns over its nuclear program, doors will open to better relations. If it does not, however, North Korea will face increased isolation and hardship.

Like North Korea, Iraq and Iran pose serious challenges to our nonproliferation efforts. But because they are located adjacent to each other along the littoral of the vital Persian Gulf, where 65 percent of the world’s oil reserves are located, these two backlash states also present a complex strategic puzzle that has confounded the policies of three previous American administrations.

The basic strategic principle in the Persian Gulf region is to establish a favorable balance of power, one that will protect critical American interests in the security of our friends and in the free flow of oil
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at stable prices. In previous administrations, this was pursued by relying on one regional power to balance the other. First the United States built up Iran under the shah as a supposed regional pillar of stability. Then it backed Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in its war with revolutionary Iran to contain the influence of Khomeini’s Islamic government. Both approaches proved disastrous. In the shah’s case, the U.S. strategy for regional stability collapsed when he was overthrown. And in Saddam Hussein’s case, American backing assisted him in acquiring a massive conventional arsenal which he used, first against his own people and then later Kuwait.

THE LOGIC OF DUAL CONTAINMENT

The Clinton administration’s strategy toward these two backlash states begins from the premise that today both regimes pursue policies hostile to our interests. Building up one to counter the other is therefore rejected in favor of a policy of “dual containment.” In adopting this approach, we are not oblivious to the need for a balance of power in this vital region. Rather, we seek with our regional allies to maintain a favorable balance without depending on either Iraq or Iran. We are able to do so because we have a number of advantages that previous administrations did not.

First, the end of the Cold War simply eliminated a major strategic consideration from our calculus. We no longer have to fear Soviet efforts to gain a foothold in the Persian Gulf by taking advantage of our support for one of these states to build relations with the other. The strategic importance of both Iraq and Iran has therefore been reduced dramatically, and their ability to play the superpowers off each other has been eliminated.

Second, over the last decade, a regional balance of power between Iran and Iraq has been established at a much lower level of military capability. Iraq’s victory in the Iran-Iraq War substantially reduced Iran’s conventional offensive capabilities. And Iraq’s defeat in Desert Storm significantly diminished its offensive capabilities and brought its weapons of mass destruction under tight control. Without the backing of an alternate superpower, they now confront serious difficulties in challenging U.S. power.
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Third, as a result of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are less reluctant to enter into security and pre-positioning arrangements with Washington. These arrangements provide our military forces with an ability to deploy in the Persian Gulf against any threat that either Iraq or Iran might pose to these states.

Finally, broader trends in the region are positive. Washington enjoys strong relations with the region's other critical powers: Egypt, Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia. Progress in resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict solidifies our position in the Arab world and strengthens the ties between our regional allies. It increases the isolation of Iraq and Iran while reducing their ability to exploit the Arab-Israeli conflict to promote their regional ambitions. The comprehensive settlement that the United States seeks will cost Iraq the opportunity to manipulate the Palestinian cause and rob Iran of its ability to promote turmoil in Lebanon.

In sum, until circumstances change there is no longer a need to depend on either Iraq or Iran to maintain a favorable balance and protect U.S. friends and interests in the gulf. The Clinton administration is, nevertheless, confident that we can sustain this situation for some time, in large measure because we have an understanding with our regional friends about the common threats and how to deal with them. While working to consolidate these positive trends, we remain alert to the possibility of change.

“Dual containment” does not mean duplicate containment. The basic purpose is to counter the hostility of both Baghdad and Tehran, but the challenges posed by the two regimes are distinct and therefore require tailored approaches. Although neighbors, the two states are quite different in culture and historical experience. In Saddam Hussein's regime, Washington faces an aggressive, modernist, secular avarice; in Iran, it is challenged by a theocratic regime with a sense of cultural and political destiny and an abiding antagonism toward the United States.

In Iraq, the regime is responsible for both war crimes and crimes
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against humanity, a regime whose invasion of Kuwait and gassing of its own people have rendered it an international renegade. In post-
Khomeini Iran, a revolutionary regime remains engaged in outlaw behavior. Nevertheless, the Clinton administration does not oppose Islamic government, nor does it seek the regime’s overthrow. Indeed we remain ready for an authoritative dialogue in which we will raise aspects of Iranian behavior that cause us so much concern.

Containing Iraq presents a different kind of challenge than containing Iran. After the Gulf War, the United Nations established a far-reaching regime to ensure that Iraq never again threatens its neighbors or world peace and to deter Saddam Hussein’s aggression against Iraqi citizens. Three years after the invasion of Kuwait, sanctions are still being sustained. The international community is sufficiently alarmed by Saddam’s behavior and sufficiently suspicious of his intentions to support Washington’s insistence on full compliance with all relevant U.N. Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

Even today, Saddam’s army is engaged in the systematic destruction of the marsh Arab society in southern Iraq while he wages a campaign of terror and blockades against Kurdish, Turkoman and other citizens of northern Iraq. As the Iraqi regime cooperates with the U.N. Special Commission on Iraq (UNSCOM), it is also engaged in clandestine efforts to acquire rocket fuel precursors while failing to give a full accounting of its weapons programs. Thus, it is hardly surprising that every 60 days the sanctions have been extended with little debate.

Lately, Iraq has shown some signs of altering its attitude toward some U.N. requirements, evidenced by its recent acceptance of Security Council Resolution 715, which provides for long-term monitoring of its WMD programs. However, this acceptance comes in the context of continued Iraqi rejection of other Security Council resolutions, especially its refusal to recognize Kuwait’s sovereignty and borders. Defiance is thus combined with a guise of compliance. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the only reason the Iraqi regime is beginning to cooperate with UNSCOM is to secure the lifting of oil sanctions. Once the oil starts flowing again, Washington must assume that Saddam will renege on long-term monitoring and begin rebuilding his WMD programs. Thus, before considering whether oil
sanctions are to be lifted, there should be a high degree of confidence that Iraq has not only complied fully with the technical requirements of the WMD provisions but will continue to comply indefinitely. As UNSCOM chairman Rolf Ekeus has insisted, that will require a long period of testing of the permanent monitoring systems. This proposition has been accepted by Washington and its U.N. Security Council (UNSC) partners. They also recognize that the council’s review of the sanctions regime will be influenced by Saddam’s broader intentions, of which there is ample evidence.

The U.N. resolutions also reflect the international consensus in support of an end to Saddam’s repression of the Iraqi people. Working closely with U.N. agencies and international human rights organizations, we are calling attention to the plight of Iraqi citizens who have been brutalized by this regime and insist on having human rights monitors inside the country. The Clinton administration is also engaged directly in humanitarian aid for the Kurds and other groups in northern Iraq as they reconstruct their lives and homes under the protection of coalition forces that deter Saddam’s brutality.

The humanitarian efforts of the international community in Iraq are a strong indication of its concern for the plight of the Iraqi people. It is also conscious of the impact of sanctions on their daily lives. Security Council Resolutions 706 and 712—which Saddam refuses to implement—were specifically introduced to alleviate their plight. They would permit Iraq to sell limited quantities of oil to finance the purchase of food and other humanitarian items, provided that the sale and distribution of goods is monitored by the U.N. It should therefore be clear that Saddam Hussein, not the international community, is responsible for their continued suffering.

As a signal of our interest in a democratic Iraq, the Clinton administration also supports the objectives of the Iraqi National Congress, the exile organization that represents a broad spectrum of religious, secular and ethnic communities. The INC has recently broadened its base, established facilities in northern Iraq and deepened its ties with neighboring Arab governments that share the twin goals of maintaining Iraq’s territorial integrity while promoting representative and benign governance in Baghdad.
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Despite Saddam's efforts to buy loyalties, sanctions are taking their toll on the crucial inner circle on which the regime depends. There are now frequent reports of coup attempts and unrest among the relatively privileged Iraqi elite. These trends could lead to new conditions for the citizens of Iraq and new opportunities to build a more peaceful and normal relationship between Iraq and the outside world.

The Challenge from Tehran

Iran is both a lesser and a greater challenge. On the one hand, the Clinton administration is not confronting a blatantly aggressive state that invaded and occupied a weaker neighbor. More normal relations with the government in Tehran are conceivable, once it demonstrates its willingness to abide by international norms and abandon policies and actions inimical to regional peace and security. On the other hand, political differences with Iran will not easily be resolved. Iran is a revolutionary state whose leaders harbor a deep sense of grievance over the close ties between the United States and the shah. Its revolutionary and militant messages are openly hostile to the United States and its core interests. This basic political reality will shape relations for the foreseeable future. Reconciliation will be difficult, but the choice is Iran's to make.

The United States does not oppose Islam; it opposes extremism, religious or secular. The American quarrel with Iran should not be misconstrued as a "clash of civilizations" or opposition to Iran as a theocratic state. Washington does not take issue with the "Islamic" dimension of the Islamic Republic of Iran. As President Clinton has said, America has a deep respect for the religion and culture of Islam. It is extremism, whether religious or secular, that we oppose. The United States is concerned with the actions and policies of the Tehran government. Iran is actively engaged in clandestine efforts to acquire nuclear and other unconventional weapons and long-range missile-delivery systems. It is the foremost sponsor of terrorism and assassination worldwide. It is violently and vitriolically opposed to the Arab-Israeli peace process. It seeks to subvert friendly governments across

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the Middle East and in parts of Africa. It is attempting to acquire offensive conventional capabilities to threaten its smaller gulf neighbors. Its record on treatment of its own citizens—especially women and religious minorities—is deeply disturbing.

In confronting these manifold challenges, the Clinton administration faces an easier task than in the case of Iraq because Iran’s weapons of mass destruction are at a relatively early stage of development. In that sense it has an opportunity now to prevent Iran from becoming in five years time what Iraq was five years ago. But containment is also more difficult because the administration is not backed by an international consensus reflected in UNSC resolutions, as in Iraq’s case. And it does not have broad sanctions in place to effect changes in Iran’s unacceptable behavior. Previous administrations have tried their hands at building up “moderates” in Iran. What we have learned from that experience is that these same “moderates” are responsible for the very policies we find so objectionable. However, Iran’s economic mismanagement has combined with the downturn in the oil market to produce a desperate economic situation for the Iranian government. With 30 percent inflation, a $30 billion debt and $5 billion in arrears on its short-term repayments, Iran no longer looks like a good commercial proposition. This makes it easier to argue with U.S. allies against improving ties with Iran for purely commercial motives.

To counter Iran’s quest for domination of the Persian Gulf, Washington works closely with friendly governments to prevent Iran from procuring needed imports for its nuclear and chemical programs, and is vigilant about the transfer of missiles and missile-related systems from Iran’s current suppliers, including North Korea. This does not mean Washington intends to quarantine Iran or deny it all military-related goods. This administration tries to distinguish between defense items that do not affect the regional security environment and those items that have an offensive use and could destabilize the area.
NOT A CRUSADE BUT A COMMITMENT

The U.S. strategy depends heavily on active coordination and consultations with friendly countries. Iran needs to hear a steady and consistent message from the Western countries whose approval and trade it seeks. We have achieved some consensus among the European Union, Canada and Japan on those aspects of Iran's actions that we find unacceptable. Some of our allies believe, however, that the regional policy must rely largely on positive incentives for Iran. The record clearly shows, however, that positive inducements such as trade and aid concessions or rescheduling of loans do not lead to real changes in Iran's unacceptable behavior. The most effective message is a consistent one: no normal relations until these actions end. But we do not eschew an authoritative dialogue; dialogue and pressure are not mutually exclusive policy approaches.

There are some risks inherent in the coupling of our approaches to Iraq and Iran. To the extent they are pressured, they may be driven together in their efforts to resist the West. Indeed, Baghdad and Tehran seem to have engaged in limited cooperation over the past year, despite their differences. Ultimately, however, the prospects for reconciliation will remain limited for a simple reason: they mistrust each other more than they mistrust the United States. While they have a common interest in tactical cooperation, neither has a real interest in helping the other grow stronger; each knows that it will be the first target of a resurgent state on the other side of the Shatt-al-Arab.

There is also the danger that in maintaining our efforts to force Iraq to comply with all U.N. resolutions, we will provide opportunities for Iran to meddle and prey on Iraqi weakness. Again, we have seen efforts by Iran to build its relations with Iraq's Shiites and meddle in Kurdish politics. But the evidence suggests this fear is exaggerated. From the time of the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq's Shiites have retained their Iraqi and Arab identity and remain wary of falling under Iran's influence. Similarly, Iran's efforts in the north seem focused on weakening its own separatist Kurdish minority rather than seeking to weaken Iraq by promoting the breakaway of the north. Indeed, like Iraq's other neighbors, Syria and Turkey, Iran
seems concerned to avoid the disintegration of Iraq for fear that it will encourage the disintegration of its own hinterland.

The Clinton Administration has forged a realistic and sustainable policy that takes into account U.S. interests and the realities of the Persian Gulf region. Today the regimes in Baghdad and Tehran are weaker and increasingly on the defensive. Slowly but surely they are coming to understand that there is a price to pay for their recalcitrant commitment to remain on the wrong side of history. This is not a crusade, but a genuine and responsible effort, over time, to protect American strategic interests, stabilize the international system and enlarge the community of nations committed to democracy, free markets and peace.

Forty-seven years ago, George Kennan, writing under a pseudonym in this journal, made the case for containment of an outlaw empire. He argued that the United States had within its power the means to “to increase enormously the strains under which Soviet policy must operate” and thereby generate the “break-up or gradual mellowing of Soviet power.” Today, the United States faces a less formidable challenge in containing the band of outlaws we refer to as “the backlash states.” It is still very much within our power to prevail.?