

# Offensive Realism: The US Strategies to Contain Iran

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## Abstract

*The Islamic Revolution, as one of the greatest political developments in the twentieth century - caused a radical change in the Iranian political system. Consequently, it has posed a tough challenge for the American politics in protecting its significant interests in the region. Since then, the US has employed multiple methods to contain the growing influence of Iran which has left the tremendous impact on its interests in the region. Similar, approaches have been used against many other countries of the world where the American interests have been affected. Thus, understanding the US tools and strategies used against the Islamic Republic of Iran would help independent countries better to confront with the similar problems. This research tries to respond this question that what were the US strategies to control and contain the Islamic Republic in the last four decades? Mearsheimer's offensive realism has been used to answer that question. The offensive realist approach has been extensively discussed to find out the similar patterns in the US strategy towards Iran. The results of this article clearly point to the several US strategies to control the power and maintain an influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Middle East which has posed the potential challenges to the American interests in the said region.*

**Keywords:** Offensive Realism; Balance of Power; Buck Passing; Sanctions.

## 1. Introduction

The United States has struggled for the decades to prove itself as the world's greatest power. For the past four decades; the great goal of the United States has been to promote its status as a "global hegemony" and prevent the domination of a particular power in the different parts of the world. Further, it employs the various goals and policies to maintain its control and influence internationally. The US has both hard and soft tools to dominate other states; hard tools such as buck passing, balance of power, waging war, bait and bleed, and triggering conflicts between other states. The soft tools are their public diplomacy which is mainly done by their mass media. However, as faced with Islamic Revolution that is an ideological challenge to the social world's power. The United States has utilized all its resources and tools at the domestic, regional, and global levels. By focusing on US strategies against the Islamic Republic of Iran; one can better understand the political behaviors of this country, and anticipate other actions; on the other hand, it can raise the

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awareness of common people and elites to minimize the influence and implementation of other US goals in their country.

In addition, there has been a great deal of research on the US-Islamic Republic's confrontation, including the study of James Bale -believes that after the collapse of Soviet Union: the world observed the US as world's only hegemony which tries to keep its power unchallenged. But since then, the United States has always been opposing and confronting new threats in the world for its hegemony. China, as world's economic power, and Iran, as an ideological weigh - are among these threats (Torabi, 2009). The United States has strived to face no direct confrontation with these economical and ideological hegemonies by relying local powers. This dependence has the least charge for the superpower. Parting with this, it should be mentioned that while this paper was being written, the two states were seriously on the verge of direct military confrontation which was started by the assassination of Quds force commando – Lieutenant General Soleimani. Quds force is the extraterritorial military branch of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

With regard to the US pressure strategies toward Iran; it can be mentioned that it used Iraq to contain Iran in the first decade of the Iranian revolution. This military invasion of Iran was supported by the US and some regional Arab countries. After some years that Iraq again attacked to Kuwait, the United States played the role of balancing the relationship of Iran-Iraq. During the second and third decades of the Islamic Revolution; the US built military bases the Middle East and waged war against Afghanistan and Iraq respectively such as the neighboring countries to the east and west of Iran; also since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution; the sanction strategy has always been used by the United States. Even with a successful Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), that was an agreement between Iran and all permanent members of united nations as well European union and Germany, the unilaterally US withdrew from this agreement claiming that it was the biggest mistake of the US administration – an agreement that had lifted united nations sanctions against Iran. It is noteworthy that in the anti-Iranian US strategies was gradually shifted from mostly hard strategies to mostly soft strategies. Their aim was the encouragement of internal collapse of the state done by the people and without direct involvement of foreigners. One of the important means for this goal was provided by internet applications and soft wares.

The focus of this article is on the US strategies for containment the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past four decades. For this end, "Offensive Realism" was used to explain the US strategies with respect to Iran. It is an important to note that all the strategies as used by the US against Iran over the past forty years- are out of the scope of this paper, and the center of attention is only on some strategies that can be only described by the theory of offensive realism.

Offensive realism was the first presented by leading American political scientist called John Joseph Mearsheimer. Within his theory, Mearsheimer

proposes four strategies of appeasement, bandwagoning, balancing, and buck passing. The US employs these strategies to stand against any potential hegemony and maintain the desired status quo. The present study employs the descriptive analytical research method and library documents to come up with its results.

## **2. Offensive Realism**

In offensive realism theory, by accepting the assumptions of realism, Mearsheimer describes the great powers in pursuit of four goals such as becoming the world's only hegemony; controlling the largest possible percentage of world wealth; keeping the balance of different regions of the world to their own advantage, and achieving nuclear superiority. Apart from this, by these power-seeking strategies; the survival of any hegemony, in lieu of foreign powers - is to high extent guaranteed. In addition, by gaining power through the above-mentioned strategies; the balance of power in other regions is disturbed or even lost (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The strategic location of Iran in the Middle East; its huge amount of energy (e.g., ranking first for gas and oil together in the world), and its nuclear power (e.g., with more than half a century of age), are among the important reasons that made Iran as a regional power. Its vast area, its population of over 80 million people; its open sea access, great economic potential; and of course, a history of thousand years are other significant features of this country. As based on an aggressive realism; Iran should not be left out of consideration of any global hegemony that also looks for regional dominance.

The Principles of Offensive Realism have many important effects on the relations among states; creation of anarchy in international system; irrational conditions among states and survival uncertainties (Mearsheimer, 2001). Also, at the time of political interactions among states, strong incentives for aggressive behaviors or decisions exist among them. In addition, the weaker states develop a fear that persuades them to maximize power or at least employ a bandwagoning strategy that is following powerful states to receive help for survival and benefit from their success in the anarchic system of the world.

Another important notion in offensive realism is "hegemony". In the literature of Leninism, hegemony means political leadership in a class coalition (Laclau & Mouffe, 1987). In other words, it is a type of intellectual and cultural leadership exercised by the ruling class (Boggs, 1984). After the Cold War, America was the only hegemonic power in the world and its behavior was influenced by this concept. From this time on, the United States has been a superpower beyond regional powers, and all its efforts have been made on maintaining its prestigious power through out the world.

How the global hegemonies prevent regional powers from dominating distant regions that depend on the balance of power in those regions. If the power is almost evenly distributed between the big states, and there is no potential hegemony among them, then the distant hegemony can easily and

safely stay out of any conflict in those areas; but, if a hegemony emerges in a region, the superpower's or global hegemony's first option is not to intervene in the regional conflict of power and allow large local powers to control and resolve the crisis. If the great local powers fail to address the threat, superpower will stand against the enemy (Mearsheimer, 2001).

In the theory of offensive realism, Mearsheimer proposed strategies to deal with state challenges include buck passing, balance of power; war of attrition; baiting and bloodletting. The important point in the framework of offensive realism strategies is to emphasize on the hard strategies. In other words, in recent years, especially during the Obama presidency; there have been a variety of soft strategies, including the "colorful revolution" to counter the Islamic Republic of Iran. But much of this paper is about how to implement American strategies in the form of offensive realism. Therefore, offensive realism concepts such as "cultural warfare", "transformation" and similar terms in writing this paper have been avoided. Consequently, this article only touches some of anti-Iranian US strategies against Iran within the last 40 years.

### **3. US offensive strategies**

The strategy is closely linked to the army and the military dimension, as Liddell Hart (1967), describes it as the art of distributing and using military tools to serve policy goals. Robert Osgood views strategy as a general program to exploit the powers of military power and the associated economic, diplomatic, and psychological tools of power openly or covertly in support of foreign policy. Clausewitz stated that the strategy as the technique of deploying and directing battle as a means of achieving war goals (Beyerchen, 1992).

Mearsheimer suggests four strategies of war, blackmail, bait-and-bleed, and stimulation for erosion to contain regional hegemony against potential hegemony in the region. Further, it also proposes four strategies for maintaining the status quo, balancing, silencing, following, and buck-passing responsibility for great powers. Given that US exposure to contain the Islamic Republic of Iran has been restrained during the age of the global mono-polar and transitional period, the following strategies have been used by the US, namely buck-passing responsibility, balancing, war and bait and-bleed. We would now study these strategies.

The succession strategy is such that the threatened government abandons the hope of preventing the attacker from gaining power at his own expense and instead joins forces with his dangerous enemy; thereby providing at least a small amount of spoils of war won. The strategy of silencing is such that the country using this strategy seeks to reinforce the expectation that the move will act to make the attacker feel more secure and thereby reduce or eliminate. The motives of this country to lead the offensive (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The ransom strategy is based on the threat of the use of force, not the use of force in the true sense of the word; in order to achieve the desired results. The ransom is usually unburdened because; however, the great powers are more likely to ignore the threats of the other great powers to fight them (Mearsheimer, 2001). Given this notion, the Islamic Republic of Iran has not been blackmailed to the United States since the Islamic Revolution, which is one of the reasons for America's hostility and hostility.

According to these concepts, the US strategy of silence and pursuit against the Islamic Republic of Iran has not been practically used, which can be attributed to American hegemony and superior power. In other words, the United States has used counterbalancing and remediation strategies to prevent the infiltration of the Islamic Republic of Iran into the region, and has resorted to prudent warfare, baiting, and firing strategies to propel the Islamic Republic of Iran. As the follows are the strategies used by the United States in relation to the Islamic Republic of Iran in the form of strategies to safeguard the status quo (e.g., balancing and balancing) and strategies that seek to change the balance (e.g., war, prey and firefighting).

### **3.1 Buck Passing**

The countries with the responsibility are trying to force another great power to control and contain the invader while remaining on the sidelines. Threatened countries usually prefer to adopt a strategy of transferring responsibility rather than balancing it, often because the carrier is avoiding the costs of counter-attacking in the event of a war (Mearsheimer, 2001). In fact, this strategy is a clear example of "free rides" in the field of international relations, because on the one hand, the country that wins the main interest does not enter the battlefield and on the other the least. It would cause possible damage to itself. The below given are examples of US liability.

#### **3.1.1 Buck passing to Saudi Arabia**

One prominent example is the US use of the strategy of transferring responsibility for maintaining Persian Gulf security to Saudi Arabia and Iran after the Vietnam War. According to the Nixon Doctrine, formally promulgated in 1969, the US government entrusted the task of protecting Western interests in important parts of the world to its unified regimes in the Third World as far as possible. In the Gulf region, the US first delegated this responsibility to Iran and then, to Saudi Arabia (Taromi, 2006). Saudi Arabia has been identified as a major alternative to US strategy with Iran because of its relative power over other Arab Gulf states, and its close political relationship with the United States.

After the Islamic Revolution and the imposed war, the United States sought to use a one pillar policy to confront Iran, and in a particular the issue of exporting the revolution. The United States sought to establish a unipolar security system in the Persian Gulf after the Cold War; and it was essentially designed to allow one powerful country to assume responsibility for the security of other small and voluntary states within the political and military

boundaries of the Persian Gulf to take charge (Seiqal, 1993). According to this system, Saudi Arabia was the most important regional ally of the United States, playing an essential role in the competition between Iran and the United States (Allison, 2010). It expanded its military relations (Ebrahimi, 2004) and, on the other hand, as expanded its nuclear sites with the country. Expansion of activities and efforts to nuclearise with the recent failures of the region, especially in Syria and Yemen, are followed more seriously by Saudi Arabia. While supporting Saudi Arabia in recent years, the United States has sought to exploit and profit economically through the sale of military equipment.

### **3.1.2 Buck Passing to Iraq**

The US goal in the Iran-Iraq war was to prevent regional hegemony. The Iraq war against Iran is one of the most important examples of Buck passing strategy. The United States implemented its intentions through Iraq, bearing the least damage and bringing Iraq into the war with Iran. Throughout the war and even at the end of the imposed war; the United States was a major Iraqi supporter of its goals. At a historic juncture, the Americans have used an intense pressure to limit Iran's military capabilities against Iraq. Iran was then, included in the list of countries that support terrorism. At other stages, they directly sold military equipment and dispatched an official delegation to the Islamic Republic of Iran; eventually using their combat units in the Persian Gulf to provide an environment for the internationalization of the Iran-Iraq War (Mottaqi, 2000).

### **3.1.3 Sanctions**

Because multilateral co-operation is often associated with the success of sanctions (Elliott, 1998), the other US measures of responsibility have been sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran. The US Congress imposed double sanctions in 1996, on penalties for companies investing in Iran's oil-related sectors, known as the D'amato's Act, which stepped up pressure on Iran. In the arms sector, Iran also faced many restrictions on providing its military supplies that had been destroyed by the war (Eftekhari & Baqeri Dolatabadi, 2010). The law-imposed sanctions on American and non-American individuals who invest \$ 20 million or more every 12 months to develop and expand Iran's oil resources. The combination of these factors changed the situation in favor of regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. These actors were welcomed as American regional allies with a huge volume of weapons.

The imposition of sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran can be seen as an example of America's performance in pushing for a strategy of accountability. The United States initially accused Iran of supporting international terrorism, Hamas and disrupting peace talks, overthrowing the fundamentalist system in the region, acquiring conventional weapons, and weapons of mass destruction. The United States opposed lending to Iran by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and sought to persuade

Europe and Japan not to have normal business relations with Iran (Marschall, 2003). The multilateral sanctions imposed between 2007, and 2013, played an important role in Iran's entry into the negotiating table (Maloney, 2015). UN Security Council resolutions did the same to bring them into dialogue with the mentioned countries (O'Sullivan, 2010).

Some of the most important international sanctions, comprising of the removals of responsibility, further to include: the intensification of secondary and transboundary sanctions (e.g., in the Clinton and George W. Bush era) that, in addition to unilateral sanctions, also affect third-party companies. Obama prohibits cooperation with Iran's industrial and energy sectors; sweeping Obama-era sanctions, including unilateral sanctions, and a coalition of US allies that imposes a wide range of industrial, weapons, nuclear, energy, travel and transportation sanctions and includes fuel. Finally, Resolution 1929, in 2010, can be considered as the most severe international sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran in the economic, military, transport and shipping, monetary and financial and nuclear fields.

### **3.1.4 Diplomatic Containment**

The pursuit of diplomatic containment policy can be seen as another US strategy in the context of transferring responsibility against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Thus, the US was on the list of outlaws at a time when the Iranian government at the time, with its tolerance policy and a technocratic pragmatic government, sought appropriate links with the countries of the region and the world to reduce tensions. In his annual address to the US Congress on January 29, George W. Bush named Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as countries that have formed an "axis of evil" (Ahmadi, 2009).

The United States also entered into military cooperation agreements with the southern Persian Gulf states that strengthened America's wider presence in the area. Immediately after the Second Persian Gulf War and the liberation of Kuwait : it signed defense contracts with Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, which it signed with the United Arab Emirates on July 25, 1994. These contracts included the sale of some military equipment to these countries and the improvement of some of their existing military equipment. The United States had signed contracts with all Gulf States to manage future operations of US troops in their countries (Matin, 2012). The United States has pursued countries, international organizations, including the United Nations, and has continued to prohibit transnational corporations from transacting with the Islamic Republic of Iran, another form of American responsibility. With the departure of the Brotherhood, the US has lost the support of other nations, but sanctions remain an effective because of the influence of international corporations and corporations.

### **3.1.5 Terrorist groups**

The creation of terrorist groups in the Islamic world is another form of buck passing that targets the principle of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Waging wars and using these groups have been a common measure by the United States to

sale of its great number of weapons in recent years - as wars and military disputes increase, so will the arms go on the sales. Therefore, stability and security in the region are at odds with US policy and its economic interests. One of the US economic goals is weapon production and selling them to other regions of the world, including the Middle East. After the Second World War, for the several decades the US has been the major arms exporter among world's states; for instance, in 2009, it had 31 percent of the arms export in the world (Hoseini, 2009). Hence, the establishment and support of terrorist groups such as ISIL, the Taliban and al-Qaeda in the Middle East, has been at least to the benefit the US arms sales.

### **3.2 Balance of Power**

In offensive realism, Balancing is one of the strategies used by the hegemonic powers to disrupt the balance of power in the different parts of the world. By balancing power, the threatened states seriously are committed to contain their dangerous rival (Mearsheimer, 2001). The US balancing model has two models: i) the use of an internal balancing as the main method, and ii) external balancing as the subsidiary method.

In an internal balancing, the US relies only on regional states to build balance and, in an external balancing the US relies on itself and the international allies. In the first model, the regional actors in the Persian Gulf attempt to maintain an internal balance and prevent it from being disrupted by any threat. In the latter, the actor outside the region (here, the US) is trying to create a balance at the local level: It helps to balance the weaker state(s) against the threat; the use of military bases, soft wars, espionage, economic sanctions, and diplomatic support for the weak ones are considered in this respect.

One of the American measures to counterbalance the Islamic Revolution was to provoke Iraq to attack Iran (Ganji, 1998). For this reason, the US support for Iraq to freely export oil from the Persian Gulf to the West - can be conceived as providing the security and stability for its strategic allies, especially Israel and some western states such as the United Kingdom. Accordingly, the United States pursued a strategy of balance maintenance by keeping the war of two countries without a winner or a no-winner war (Firouzabadi, 2010). In principle, the Iraqi military attack against the Islamic Republic of Iran can be seen as an example of a "proxy war" that was used to serve the American interests rather than the Iraqi's (Motaghi, 2000). As it was mentioned, this war had no winner; it had only a winning sensation for Iranians that defended their borders without any land loss. If this war had a winner, it was against the balance of power in the region, to be more precise, against Israel.

Another US move to balance the power in the region was the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which is consisted of six bordering countries to the Persian Gulf, namely, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar. The GCC was formed more to

counter Iranian and partly Iraqi influence in the region (Naqibzadeh, 2009). At the beginning of the 21st century; the United States has been using new methods to counter these kinds of threats, but it seems that the US policy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran is both soft and hard measures (Sazmand & Ghanbari, 2012). The direct presence of the US in the Middle East was an example of hard measures to counter Iranian dominance. The Afghanistan and the Iraq wars and establishing more than twenty military bases in the countries around Iran are the examples of the US military presence in the region, especially for balancing of the Iranian power.

### **3.3 War**

War is the main strategy used by governments to gain relative power. Except for the assassination of General Soleimani by the US and Iran's retaliation against US bases in Iraq, no direct war between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The US military actions in the Middle East over the past four decades were mainly with the aim of changing Iran's regime – of course, the current US president, Donald Trump, says the US demand regarding Iran is a change in its regional behavior not a change in the regime on the whole. This demand has always been rejected by the Iranian government.

The US and Iran experienced three war-like situations: Iraq- Iran war which was to the benefit of the US and its power balancing desires, Iran with terrorist groups in the region and the cost was on Iran for an advantage of the US arms sales, and direct military attack by US troops against a top ranking Iranian General and Iran's retaliation – both in Iraq. The one was a proxy war and the third one was a direct war, although it happened in a third state – Iraq. Regarding this assassination, it should be noted that it started by the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria; a situation which engulfed many states in and the US found another pretext to justify presence along the borders of Iran.

### **3.4 Bloodletting and Baiting**

However, Mearsheimer (2001), names bloodletting, and mentions that states employ this strategy to involve their rivals in long and costly wars. In this way, they step aside, as a third party, and see these states erode each other without directly involving in this dispute. In this case, the US sold weapons to Iraq, persuaded this country to prolong the war with Iran – here the total benefit was for the US. As for baiting, the US started had new plans to change the Iranian governments' views toward them. One of them was the recognition of Iraq by the Security Council as an invader country and the other one was an attack to Iraq after this country invaded Kuwait. The Iranian decision was not to involve in this war and its consequences.

In nuclear negotiations with Iran, the US did not keep its promises and commitments. In fact, they were used as baits to have Iran reach an agreement with the US (e.g., five other countries). After these countries and Iran signed this agreement, the US unilaterally withdrew from it. Although Iran is now facing unilateral sanctions of the US, the UN lifted all nuclear sanctions

because of that agreement. This shows the commitment of Iran to an agreement that the US without a single reason withdrew from it.

### **3.5 Enemy Making**

States employ this strategy by using all means to wage a war between at least one of their enemies. As for the case of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Iran was made to intervene in the dispute to stop the entrance of this terrorist group into its land. Here, any help to the ISIS is recognized as a means against the confronting states. Further, Iran pays for a terrorist war that the total economic and political benefits are for the US. The greatest beneficiary here is Israel, i.e. the US strongest ally.

This strategy is not only used by the foreign terrorist groups to pressurize a state. Internal conflicts can be used in the same manner. Iran had a social dispute after presidential election in 2009. It was sometimes called green revolution by the western media. The foreign secretary of the US directly said the US would support the Iranian people in this dispute. Here, the US pressure was imposed from inside against the Iranian government. Satellite TV programs are among other soft measures to persuade Iranians not to follow the government. Almost all of these channels are economically supported by the US or its allies (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016). About the terrorist groups, it should be noted that their creation along with the economic support they received as were based on buck passing strategy. But the fact that they were persuaded to continue their war with bordering countries derived from enemy making strategy. Also, the start of Iraq war against Iran is viewed from buck passing strategy and encouraging Iraq to continue this war is seen from power balancing strategy. Therefore, this war can come in discussions from two different, but overlapping strategies.

### **4. Conclusion**

Finally, it should be said that the US foreign policy regarding Iran, as follows offensive realism during the last for decades. It especially rose during Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barak Obama, and it came to its extremes at the time of Donald Trump. The US government took the several actions to contain Iranian revolution which includes: freezing billions of dollars of Iranian assets in the US, economic and military support of Iraq during its war against Iran, establishment and development of its military bases all around Iran, providing political and financial support for an anti-Iranian terrorist group (Mojahedin-e Khalq) in Iraq and sheltering them in Albania, establishment of terrorist groups (e.g., ISIS) as they themselves claim, supporting anti-Iranian nuclear development measures in International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), sending Iranian nuclear program to security council and imposing sanctions against Iran, threatening Iran by a political phrase of "all options are on the table", blaming Iran for interference in Afghanistan and Iraq, withdrawing from Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), and imposing the most severe unilateral sanctions against Iran.

With respect to Mearsheimer' offensive realism, the US applied a number of strategies to contain Iran that includes such as balance of power (Iraq war against Iran), buck passing (anti Iranian measures by Saudi Arabia, establishment of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council, unilateral sanctions against Iran, diplomatic pressures, and Iraq war against Iran), wars (Iraq war against Iran), bloodletting (the sale of US weapons to Iraq to make the war longer), baiting (invalid commitments in the nuclear deal with Iran) and enemy making (ISIS from outside and green revolution from inside of Iran). For the last case, green revolution, it is an example of soft measures the US employs against Iran to collapse its Islamic Revolution. This movement toward soft measures started with an increase in the defensive power of Iran that military actions against this country became almost impossible.

From anti-Iranian TV channels to websites and virtual networks, whatever used by Americans to impose heavy pressures on Iran. The reason that Iran can resist American soft and hard offensive strategies is their unity in front of enemies and foreign invaders - although they might have the different opinions among themselves.

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