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Trends. Iran, Iraq, and Dual Containment: The Unbalanced Balance

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Should there be a change in United States Government (USG) foreign policy towards Iran and Iraq? This question merits attention in the wake of allegedly conciliatory comments towards the USG made by Iranian President Mohammed Khatami and of continued noncompliance by Saddam Hussein with United Nations (UN)-mandated sanctions.

Since the Gulf War, the USG has seemed to embrace a dual containment policy--characterized by sanctions towards both countries. In Iran's case, the sanctions have been intended to deter terrorism, development of weapons of mass destruction, and the attempted derailment of Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts. In Iraq's case, the sanctions have been authorized by United Nations mandate and largely entail the intent to deprive Iraq of weapons of mass destruction and the means to develop them.

In both cases the policy seems to have failed. Iran has not been deterred, nor has Iraq. In fact, pressure is building on the USG to ease up on the sanctions and even end them, not on the intended targets to meet USG demands. Where does this pressure come from? From many other countries that continue to do business with Iran. From US companies that are forced to forgo pieces of the action. From many countries that continue economic and political engagement with Iran--despite pressure from the USG. From the cries of US violations and hubris towards sovereignty made by these countries regarding the Iran-Libya sanctions Act of 1986. From the epiphenomenal weakening of the relationships between these countries and the US.

In the Iraqi case there is also pressure on the USG. From media reports of the sanctions' ill effects on children. From money owed by the Iraqi government to other countries. From business agreements between Iraq and other countries that are to be activated when the sanctions are removed. From ongoing economic "leakage" that renders the sanctions less than 100% effective. From the resulting weakening of support for the UN accords among nations that allowed the sanctions to be instituted. In fact, Iran has helped Iraq circumvent UN sanctions--even if a few years earlier both countries were involved in a bloody war.

Psychologically all this might be predicted from classical balance theories--initially applied to cognitive structures of individuals and later to interactions among many configurations including those of sociometry and power. By reinforcing negative relationships with Iran and Iraq, the USG is creating a triadic configuration that would induce a dynamic towards a positive relationship between Iran and Iraq. In other words, they can be brought together by sharing the same enemy--synergistically increasing problems for the USG. This might be the case even though employing punishment or omission training towards Iran and Iraq might otherwise be expected to decrease the probability of their behaviors deemed undesirable by the USG. (Of course, another issue is that the punishment and omission training implemented by the US is perceived as insufficient or even qualitatively different by their targets.

Balance theory would suggest two policy alternatives for the USG. (1) Reinforcing positive relationships with both countries regardless of their behaviors might be expected to engage Iran and Iraq in a competition for the favors of the USG. This might be a political "hard sell" for the US Executive towards

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the US Congress. Also, it might just as well expected that Iran and Iraq would continue business as usual or exacerbate undesirable behavior as defined by US leaders with even less regard for the USG. (2) Instituting a sequence of siding with one country against the other, then--when the former becomes too strong--switching allegiances, might increase the probability that Iran and Iraq would more often work against each other and attempt to use the USG as an ally. In some ways this might seem similar to USG policy towards the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China during the Nixon era and towards Iran and Iraq during the middle and end of the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s.

With caveats for elements of indifference, uncertainty, ideology, and other epistemological assumptions concerning the perceptions of political relationships among the political elite, one might conclude that policy alternative (2)--an unbalanced balance theory--may right the imbalance of the current "balanced" policy. (See Cartwright, D., & Harary F. (1956). Structural balance: A generalization of Heider's theory. *Psychological Review*, 63, 277-293; Moore, M. (1978). An international application of Heider's balance theory. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 8, 401-405; Price, K.O., Harburg, E., & Newcomb, T.M. (1966). Psychological balance in situations of negative interpersonal attitudes. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3, 265-270; Sciolino, E. (December 16, 1997). Clinton hails Iran's conciliatory remarks, while listing concerns. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Weir, A.J. (1983). Notes for a prehistory of cognitive balance theory. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 22, 351-362.)