

H-Diplo REVIEW ESSAY 455

27 October 2022

Wallace J. Thies. *Why Containment Works: Power, Proliferation, and Preventive War*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020 ISBN13: 9781501749483

<https://hdiplo.org/to/E455>

Editor: Diane Labrosse | Commissioning Editor: Andrew Szarejko | Production Editor: Christopher Ball

Review by Dorle Hellmuth, The Catholic University of America

In *Why Containment Works*, Wallace Thies convincingly shows that there was never a need for the 2003 invasion of Iraq had Bush administration policymakers stuck to the containment and deterrence concepts that had been utilized during much of the Cold War. But this powerfully argued book is not merely about the contentious Iraq invasion that has been much debated elsewhere; Thies makes a compelling case for containment as an invaluable policy tool, and one that is easier to craft and sustain than commonly thought.

In a world where states' military assets rely on finite resources, Thies contrasts two vastly different strategic outlooks—theories of victory—of how these military resources are best utilized strategically: The Bush Doctrine which centered on action-oriented preventive use of force versus the more nuanced, long-term application of containment.

Thies defines containment strategy “as a form of managed conflict that seeks to prevent the target state from overturning the local, regional, or global distribution of power” (vii). It is a long-term approach which is often slow and requires a lot of patience, and in true George Kennan fashion, the containing state will focus on defending vital interests and tailor its responses accordingly. In short, it is best understood as a game of “move and countermove” (10). Containment also defies more traditional, clearcut measures of success aimed at the immediate elimination of a threat: A containment policy is deemed successful as long as the target state does not manage to do anything that the container state would consider unacceptable. But that’s precisely what might make it less appealing to policymakers or the public, and a seeming relict of the Cold War: It is grey as opposed to black and white; drawn out instead of quick; often more passive rather than about initiative. It is not designed to win conclusively, but rather to live with problem states.

As the contest is fluid and the various moves and countermoves are often staged simultaneously, a containment strategy may “seem disjointed, reactive, overtaken by events,” (10) improvised, or even worse, the containing state may appear in over its head and outplayed by the target state. There is room for error and failure, to be sure: Containing states might become exasperated and randomly rush on to the next tactic(s); upcoming elections might create pressures for action; or containment policies might resemble too much of a watered-down compromise to be effective. Most of the time, however, there is much potential, vast room for creativity, and remarkable versatility: “A containment policy is bounded only by the imagination and the resourcefulness of those who set it in motion and then carry it out,” (18) Thies explains. What is more, policy options available to the container state usually increase when containment works. Generally involving a mix

of “threats (verbal and nonverbal), sanctions or rewards, and if need be, forceful actions,” containment resembles “the art of thwarting an adversary’s plots and schemes, and not just once but again and again” (7). In the case of pre-2003 invasion Iraq, the US containment toolbox came with no less than five different options: United Nations WMD inspections of Iraqi offices and suspected WMD facilities; UN control of oil revenues and imports; multinational naval interdictions of WMDs and ballistic missile technology; and the enforcement of no-fly zones over Northern and Southern Iraq which, starting in 2001, also featured US and British airstrikes against Iraqi command-and-control centers near the capital as well as numerous other military targets.

Chapter 1 (fittingly titled Preventive War vs. Containment) develops the conceptual framework of the book. What policy prescriptions flow from the 2002 Bush Doctrine when viewed as a theory of victory, and how do they compare to an alternative theory of victory based on containment and deterrence? According to the Bush Doctrine, containment and deterrence had run its course in a world with “unbalanced dictators” (2), “outlaw regimes” (3), rogue states in possession or pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and “shadowy terrorist networks” (3) without country allegiances, putting a high prize on the proactive, unilateral, and *preventive* use of swift and decisive force.

Having examined the claims that make up the Bush Doctrine, Thies argues the opposite: Containment and deterrence are neither outdated, weakened, nor unsustainable concepts; buying time and wait-and-see approaches are often preferable to (rushing into) action; defense is the preferable, often superior choice to offense (precisely because superpowers like the US can rely on seemingly infinite supplies of resources against often smaller states and wear them down over time, usually without the use of military force); and preventive wars do not hold answers for the many unresolved issues and uncertainties that follow military strikes and invasions. Thies’s ‘anti-Bush Doctrine’ thus boils down to four essential factors: the willingness to 1., engage in a long-term contest against a target state via constant moves and countermoves; 2., relinquish the initiative as it often reduces the need for fighting in the first place; 3., identify potential allies and build coalitions; while being able to 4., rely on the innovative and tenacious nature of democracies (Thies is especially partial to the US separation of powers system, whose features, he argues, bring about such vetted policymaking that only the best policy ideas can survive). In fact, creating and sustaining a long-term containment strategy is not as difficult as conventional wisdom might suggest because relinquishing the initiative to the target state is “an effective way of thwarting an opponent’s plots and schemes”; regional allies increasingly threatened by the target state will opt to assist the US; and democratic containing states are especially well equipped to negate the “rise of would-be hegemon” (19) due to their resourcefulness and staying power.

Chapters 2 to 6 are devoted to testing these claims as part of five case studies from the Cold and post-Cold War world, each spanning at least two decades: the containment of Libya (1979-2003), the dual containment of Iraq and Iran (1981-2003), the containment of Iraq (1980-2003), the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the ongoing containment of Iran (since 1979). Thies measures containment success by whether the US was able to block aggressive actions by Libya, Iraq, and Iran, including “support for terrorist or other military operations,” (46) or whether those countries’ quest for nuclear weapons ceased or significantly decreased. Because the United States can rely on such a massive array of resources, there usually is no need to resort to blunt force let alone preventive war, allowing for a more cost-effective and variable approach when dealing with smaller states.

Based on evidence obtained in the five case studies, Chapter 7 reappraises containment by revisiting Thies’s alternative claims—the powerful value of ‘move and countermove’ amid constant bargaining; the willingness

to relinquish the initiative because it forces the dreadful responsibility of having to fire the first shot and start a war upon the target state; the importance of attracting regional allies; and the sustaining strengths and ingenuity of (especially presidential) democracies—further reiterating that containment works best under the aforementioned conditions. Like chapter 1, the final chapter is peppered with examples, anecdotes, and debates from the Cold War, essentially tying the Cold War and post-Cold War lessons of containment together.

Why Containment Works offers rigorous analysis, meticulously researched case studies, and a crisp, succinct structure. Thies pays close attention to the many fascinating nuances, or ‘nooks and crannies,’ that have made up US containment strategy during the Cold War and after, against especially smaller regional states, Iraq, Iran, and Libya, but also vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and China. Another major strength of the book is that Thies explores the different arguments presented by containment optimists and pessimists from all possible angles.

Above all, Thies’s findings come with crucial policy implications and should give US decisionmakers pause. When contemplating the next preventive war, containment should be considered first – because, under the right circumstances, it can work and *has* worked so many times. This has particular relevance for the ongoing Iranian nuclear dilemma, which continues to haunt the United States and the international community. Thies’s analysis of US containment of Iran ends in 2016, and President Trump withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear agreement in 2018. While the US and Iran have returned to the negotiation table under President Biden, the future of the Iran nuclear deal remains unclear, and the Iranian nuclear program is arguably further along than ever. Preventive military action is likely bound to become a hot button issue once again in the foreseeable future.

Even if Thies portrays the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate of the Iranian nuclear program or the 2015 Iran nuclear deal in too much of a positive light, the bottom line remains: Fifteen years later, there is no Iranian bomb, and Iran was willing to restrain its ambitions by conceding to the 2015 nuclear deal. Furthermore, containment does not have to end even if Iran were to go nuclear. While Thies does associate containment success with Iran’s not having produced a nuclear weapon, the historical record, according to Thies, still suggests a nuclear Iran could be contained and deterred like the Soviet Union and others before.

As the scope of any book is naturally limited, this excellent work comes with only few potential weaknesses that may best be considered avenues for further research. Since the Bush Doctrine placed such importance on preventing the next terrorist attack by striking first, such future research might examine under which circumstances terrorist networks and/or insurgent groups can be contained. Even more, what would an assessment of contemporary US policies involving larger adversaries, such as a resurgent, bellicose Russia and an increasingly assertive China, tell us about the potency of containment? Even if the United States has a larger containment arsenal, and therefore more policy options, than any other opponent, presidential democracy in the US has been in decline in recent years; this leads to questions as to whether US democracy is still robust enough—and still allowing for only the best ideas to become policy *despite* significant political polarization—to weather drawn-out cat-and-mouse-games that make up containment contests with large states?

Having said that, the book fills a crucial gap precisely because it demonstrates the overall value of containing smaller states, both during and after the Cold War, as well as containment during the Cold War (against a fellow superpower, the Soviet Union, and major regional player, China). In other words, this is an invaluable

contribution to the literature on containment theory. I have no doubt that this exquisite book will become a must-read standard work, alongside John Lewis Gaddis' *Strategies of Containment*¹ (2005) widely considered the seminal work on the Cold War containment of the Soviet Union. While several other noteworthy works since 9/11 have concentrated on the global war on terror,² Thies's book offers a refreshing take on containment against traditional state opponents and challenges pre- and post-9/11. Thies's comprehensive account of U.S. containment practices involving five different countries also goes beyond other recent books with a more limited focus on Iran.³

On a more personal note, I consider this book Wallace Thies's final masterpiece. A leading NATO specialist and scholar (*Why NATO Endures* and *Friendly Rivals: Bargaining and Burden-Shifting in NATO*),⁴ Thies sadly passed away in July 2020. When he told me about the manuscript that would turn into *Why Containment Works* a few months before his retirement, Thies humbly referred to his book project as a compilation of lecture notes (accumulated during decades of teaching international relations classes at The Catholic University of America). This book clearly goes above and beyond that. As a former doctoral student and colleague of Wallace Thies, I am incredibly grateful that his critical analysis will continue to inspire and assist current and future policymakers and students of IR theory. I highly recommend this book to any decisionmaker involved in the crafting or implementation of containment policies, as well as any serious student of containment strategy.

Dorle Hellmuth is Associate Professor of Politics at the Catholic University of America and the author of *Counterterrorism and the State* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016). Her research and teaching interests include (counter)terrorism and -radicalization; political violence; NATO; transatlantic security; and US foreign policy.

¹ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy during the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

² Ian Shapiro, *Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy against Global Terror* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Jonathan Stevenson, *Counter-terrorism: Containment and Beyond*, Adelphi Paper 367 (London: Routledge: 2005).

³ Kenneth Pollack, *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb, and American Strategy* (London: Schuster & Schuster, 2013); Ehud Eilam, *Containment in the Middle East* (Sterling, VA: Potomac Books, 2019).

⁴ Wallace Thies, *Why NATO Endures* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2009); *Friendly Rivals: Bargaining and Burden-Shifting in NATO* (London: Routledge: 2015).