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The Ghost of George Kennan

Two new books assess the nature of our alliances and what containment could mean today.

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[Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy Against Global Terror](#) by Ian Shapiro (Princeton University Press, 208 pages)

[The End of Alliances](#) by Rajan Menon (Oxford University Press, 280 pages)

Some ideas, like some gunshots, can be heard around the world, and down the centuries. On the night of February 22, 1946, a young U.S. diplomat named George Kennan, then based in Moscow, sent a [famous telegram](#) outlining what he saw as a gathering conflict with the Soviet Union. In embryonic form, that telegram prefigured a strategy Kennan would later [term](#) "containment": a "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant" resistance to Soviet expansion.

The dominant trope of Cold War security policy, containment casts a shadow over the form and direction of U.S. foreign policy. One way of understanding Bush's novel doctrine of muscular preemption is as a reaction to containment. Both start from the premise that America must capture the world's moral leadership and seize the strategic high ground. But where Kennan counseled patience, Bush urged action. Where Kennan emphasized *la longue durée*, this administration cannot see beyond its next conflagration.

Containment is also the starting point for two new books proposing new approaches to national security strategy. One comes to celebrate Kennan. The other does not quite want to bury him, but it certainly constitutes a critique. In the end, though, both are true to Kennan's spirit, and both conclude by recommending the same approach to the most immediate security issue of the day, the threat of terrorism.

Less interesting, although framed in more provocative terms, is Rajan Menon's *The End of Alliances*. Menon is a professor of International Relations at Lehigh University and a fellow at the New America Foundation, so it would perhaps be unrealistic to expect the shattering of the new foreign relations paradigm. And before page twenty, Menon has assured us that his proposal is not, in fact, as radical as it sounds. It is not alliances he wants to see end. Rather he wants to see us throw off the encrusted and encumbering bonds we forged through Cold War containment policy with, specifically, NATO, Japan, and South Korea. We have to live today, argues Menon, with more fluid friendships and ad hoc alliances "of the willing."

In Menon's telling, the Soviet-focused chain of permanent alliance broke with a longer tradition of American skepticism about what George Washington famously [called](#) "entangling alliances" in his 1796 Farewell Address. Menon tells anew the history of foreign policy starting with the Founding to give his vision of contingent alliances and fluid partnerships some grounding. Menon ends this account with Iraq and Afghanistan. He argues that U.S. allies in those theaters may have come from the traditional networks of alliances, principally NATO, but it was not the fact of NATO membership that prompted them to send troops. Rather, Menon points out, the forces in Afghanistan and Iraq reflect shifting alliances based on self-interest rather than the formal commitments embodied in long-standing treaties. Just because it's a member of NATO, in other words, doesn't mean France is going to pony up whenever the United States goes to war.

As far as it goes, this seems fair. Menon is right that calculations of self-interest have supervened to trump the formal bonds of Cold War alliances. Neither France nor any other country will vote to authorize, say, an Iran strike simply out of residual fond memories of the Marshall Plan. International treaties may reflect two countries' commitment to cooperate, but at the end of the day it will be the present occupant of the Elysée Palace or the White House that will determine the form and content of the cooperation. But NATO and other longstanding alliances are far from irrelevant. They still provide enabling channels and institutional mechanisms that facilitate cooperation. And as current tensions over the placement of missile defense systems in Eastern Europe demonstrate, the limits of alliances often demark the place where trust and the possibility of cooperation end, and distrust and conflict begin.

Menon also points his finger on a separate reason why yesterday's formal alliances may be less relevant today: The locus of global conflict is not where it was twenty years ago. Tectonic plates have shifted, and fault lines are found in new places. If NATO, Japan, and Korea are no longer so important, it is because they are no longer geostrategically central. Today's hard problems of global security strategy are thrown up by putative allies such as Pakistan, which trades in nuclear hardware and aids the Taliban, even more than by formal foes like Syria, which has been used by the United States as

New problems demand new alliances. In particular, Menon recognizes that it is through a "large coalition" that terrorism has been and will continue to be fought. Here, however, Menon's argument for more fluid alliances breaks down. It has been through *permanent* alliances -- through treaties, to be precise -- that we have been able to share evidence, freeze assets, and extradite suspects. Today's necessary coalitions must be grounded and predictable, much in the same way as the formal alliances of the Cold War. To eliminate the financial networks on which al Qaeda depends, for example, ad hoc coalitions simply will not do. The United States must negotiate enduring and complex arrangements with many countries to ensure that funds cannot flow to support terrorist acts. The same is true of global counter-terrorism investigations and arrest efforts.

Ian Shapiro has better answers to these questions. A political science professor at Yale who has written widely about tax policy, democracy, and epistemology -- academic anarchism seems encouraged in New Haven -- Shapiro takes his cue directly from Kennan's long telegram, and argues for a modified version of "containment" that aims to limit the influence of America's enemies, play potential enemies off one another, and build democracy in allies around the world.

Shapiro might have made more of the startling similarities between the threat diagnosed by Kennan and the problem of terrorism today. Kennan's 1947 summary of the Soviet worldview merits re-quoting today: "We have here a political force committed fanatically to the belief that with [the] US there can be no permanent *modus vivendi*" and that "the internal harmony of our society [must] be disrupted" and "our traditional way of life be destroyed." Sound familiar? If the principles of Cold War containment still have traction, it is because the diffuse, non-state enemy of today has one peculiar similarity to the totalitarian, state-centered enemy of fifty years ago: A potent ideological vision that is in fact impossible to create or sustain in practice. Just as Communism failed as a ruling system, so too have Islamism's promises proved illusory. Afghanistan and Sudan are key examples of the wholly hollow hopes that bin Laden and his cronies stroke.

At its heart, as Shapiro keenly stresses, containment is grounded in small-"r" realism. It is not a policy for leaders who believe they make their own reality. But sober-mindedness does not entail an insensitivity to moral concerns. In terms John Quincy Adams would have recognized, Shapiro is keenly aware of the cost to American democracy when we go searching for monsters abroad, and argues for the centrality of democratic values both here and abroad. Some of this boils down to "pay attention, be smart, and be modest" -- which, while banal, is hardly useless advice these days. But the emphasis on democratic principles as both an internal limit on our ambitions and as a value to be cultivated in allies is nevertheless especially welcome, as American friends like Egypt, Russia, and Pakistan continue to pursue the hollowing out of democratic forms with gusto.

Giving life to his broad canvass, Shapiro provides brief visions of what a future Iraq policy grounded in containment might look like. There are many similarities to that now-forgotten bellwether, the Iraq Study Group. He provides a particularly acerbic account of the administration's inept and ill-informed attitude towards Iran. Like Kennan, Shapiro sees how a fuller understanding of Iran's local politics would allow us to leverage these tensions into foreign policy successes.

According to Shapiro, successful Iraq policy requires not only a shift from military occupation to what he calls "the modern equivalent of the Marshall Plan," but also a new posture toward Iran. In Iran, Shapiro sees a potential "force for Western democratic values" -- if only we can figure out how to cultivate those values among Iranians. Certainly, confrontation has had precisely the opposite consequence. The administration's **decision** not to talk to Iran in 2002 was, in Shapiro's analysis, a catastrophic mistake. Today, in his view, Iran should be cultivated as a potential ally, especially in the hard task of stabilizing Iraq.

Shapiro's book, while rich and rewarding, is clearly meant as a rapid intervention. Its footnotes, for example, are surprisingly heavy on websites in lieu of more scholarly work. It's to be hoped that Shapiro is not done -- his ideas here deserve extended discussion. And as the post-Bush world starts to take form, there will be a continued need for creative thinking and the rediscovery of intellectual resources we have unwisely abandoned.



Aziz Huq directs the Liberty & National Security Program at the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU, and is an associate professor of law at NYU. His book, *Unchecked and Unbalanced: Presidential Power in a Time of Terror* (with Fritz Schwarz) will be out in paperback in 2008.

