

Containment vs. Rollback: national security policy designed to stop an adversary's expansion versus one designed to reduce the amount of territory under an adversary's direct or indirect control.

The strategy of containment is most often associated with US national security policy during the 1946-1991 period, and NATO strategy from 1949-1991. Containment should not be viewed as a single policy, but instead as a number of related policies that share the goal of preventing an adversary's expansion and preserving the *status quo*. Specific containment strategies may vary in means and geographic scope. Some proponents of containment, usually those in the *realpolitik* tradition, advocate a limited approach that makes distinctions between vital and peripheral interests, and emphasizes political and economic tools of statecraft over military force. More hawkish versions of containment may expand commitments globally and emphasize military power. Proponents of rollback, in contrast, are not content with maintaining the *status quo*, but instead want to reverse an adversary's gains by liberating client states. The means employed to contain or rollback an adversary range from political pressure to economic sanctions, psychological warfare, subversion, insurgency, and direct military confrontation.

The policy of containment, first articulated in 1946 by George F. Kennan in his "long telegram, is largely consistent with the tradition of *realpolitik*. Kennan sought to make distinctions between vital and peripheral interests, and to keep containment limited in scope both geographically and in means. The defense of Europe was prioritized over Asia and the Third World, and political and economic tools were to take precedence over military instruments. In keeping with these ideas, NATO was created to bind the US to Europe, and to contain Soviet power through conventional and nuclear deterrence.

In response to Soviet moves in East Europe and the Middle East, and the "loss of China," the Truman administration adopted NSC-68 in 1950, which signaled a shift in containment policy. Kennan's brand of containment gave way to Paul Nitze's, which called for a global commitment to prevent the spread of communism. NSC-68 also emphasized the role of military power.

During the 1952 election cycle, Dwight D. Eisenhower and other members of the Republican candidate's campaign staff called for abandoning containment in favor of a more bold alternative. The idea of rollback, however, was short lived and only took hold rhetorically. Once in office, the new administration pursued "The New Look," which was more in keeping with Kennan's policies than rollback or even NSC-68. Along with reintroducing distinctions between vital and peripheral interests, the strategy placed greater emphasis on nuclear deterrence (Massive Retaliation), in an effort to reduce the size of conventional forces and restore budgetary discipline.

The inauguration of John F. Kennedy brought about another shift in US and NATO policy. In the waning years of the Eisenhower administration, European allies and key figures in the Republican party began to question the credibility of massive retaliation in a world that was increasingly characterized by mutually assured destruction (MAD). To restore credibility, the Kennedy administration expanded global commitments, increased military spending, and sought to build conventional and nuclear capabilities for the purpose of allowing the United States and

NATO to meet challenges at any level of escalation. The Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, and other setbacks quickly demonstrated the costs and risks associated with this new policy.

Flexible response was officially abandoned by the Nixon administration, which sought to reduce the costs of containment through US-Soviet détente. While the US and NATO remained prepared to contain any further communist expansion, détente recognized a Soviet sphere of influence and allowed for some accommodation. Containment underwent yet another series of changes during the Carter years. The new administration believed that the US was finally free of the “inordinate fear of communism” and sought to further reduce US-Soviet tensions, but following Soviet and Cuban expansion in Africa, Central America, the Caribbean, and Asia, the government reversed course. Carter’s 1979 State of the Union address was more in keeping with a NSC-68 than Nixon’s détente or Carter’s first years in office.

The Reagan administration entered office on a platform calling for increased military spending that was aimed at restoring national resolve and reversing Soviet gains. The Reagan Doctrine not only represented a sharp break with the previous administration’s policies, but in some respects represented a break with the past thirty years of containment. The Reagan Doctrine sought to reverse communist gains in Afghanistan, Angola, Nicaragua, and other countries. This was to be accomplished by both overt and covert means, including insurgency, counter-insurgency, and regime change. Reagan cast the Cold War in ideological terms and called for the rollback of communism, the removal of the Berlin Wall, and the liberation of East Europe.

What were the effects of Cold War containment policies? Scholars debate the degree to which containment in general, and the Reagan administration in particular, contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Critics of containment charge that communism was economically and morally bankrupt, and doomed to fail from the start. In contrast, proponents of containment argue that the US, NATO, and members of the free world laid siege to communism for forty years, ultimately resulting in the Soviet Union’s collapse. However, proponents of rollback counter that the survival of communism in China, North Korea, and Cuba demonstrates that the collapse of the Soviet Union was far from inevitable. Instead, pressure from the arms race, fears stemming from the potential viability of Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and the humiliating defeat of the Red Army in Afghanistan helped break the will of the Soviet leadership.

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Suggestions on further reading:

Burnham, James. *Containment or Liberation? An Inquiry Into the Aims of United States Foreign Policy*. New York, NY: J Day, 1953.

Gaddis, John Lewis. *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Judge, Edward H. and John W. Langdon. *The Cold War: A History Through Documents*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999.