

How to Talk to Iran

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When President Bush assumed office, Iran was not a nuclear power. When his successor takes the oath of office next year, however, Iran will have achieved (or be on the verge of achieving) that status. Nothing the Bush Administration or the international community is doing now is likely to alter Iran's behavior over the coming year. Indeed, so long as the sanctions adopted by the UN Security Council don't directly affect the Iranian economy, Iranian leaders won't have to make a choice between their economic well-being and their nuclear development and will thus proceed on the path to completing the nuclear fuel cycle.

Senators Clinton, McCain, or Obama all know that the current policy is not going to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. So if they are to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran once becoming president -- something all have committed themselves to trying to assure -- they are going to have to change course, and direct engagement with the Iranians will be the likely result. Either Clinton or Obama will likely try negotiations as a primary strategy in order to see if there is a way through incentives and disincentives to stop the Iranian nuclear program. Even McCain knows that there is no way he can employ force to set back the Iranian nuclear program without showing the American public (and the world) that he genuinely tried direct negotiations to resolve the issue first.

In order to launch such negotiations, the next president will need to drop the Bush precondition that Iran must first suspend its uranium enrichment. But since there is a danger that Iran will see this as an admission of defeat in which America will concede everything sooner or later, the next president must succeed in increasing economic pressures at the same time. To do so, and thus prime the ground for negotiations, America must convince its European allies to adjust their policies as well as strategically influence less friendly powers like China and Russia to fall in line.

America's readiness to talk to Iran without conditions provides leverage with those who want it to join the negotiations with the Iranians. In particular, the Europeans have been convinced, rightly or wrongly, that a deal with the Iranians on the nuclear issue is possible, but only if the United States is also at the table. It is the United States, they believe, that can provide what the Iranians most want in terms of full acceptance of the regime, security assurances, and an end to sanctions and calls for economic boycotts. Given this view, the next administration must go quietly to the British, French and Germans and make clear that while it is ready to drop the precondition on

Iranian suspension of enrichment, join the talks directly, and put a credible comprehensive proposal on the table, it cannot do so until they agree to ratchet up the pressure on Iran at the same time. Europeans would thus need to agree on EU-wide sanctions that cut off investment in the Iranian oil and natural gas sectors, commerce with Iranian banks, and all credit guarantees to their companies doing business in Iran.

Many Europeans would find this difficult to do, especially given concerns that the Chinese and Russians would simply take their place in Iran. That argues not for relaxing what the next administration asks of the EU, but for also doing parallel preparation with the Chinese, Russians, and Saudis prior to entering negotiations with the Iranians.

The next administration will need to convince the Chinese that as America contemplates direct talks with the Iranians, they must not undercut those negotiations by removing the leverage that could make them succeed. Indeed, if the Chinese want to ensure that force is not the only option left to stop the Iranian nuclear program, they must not undercut the sanctions. The Saudis could be very important in this connection: They don't want to face an Iran that has a nuclear shield behind which it can engage in coercion and subversion, so America should try to convince them to use their enormous financial clout with the Chinese.

The Russians may be reluctant to restrain their relations [with] Iran given their interests in becoming an alternative to the United States in the Middle East and elsewhere. Still, the Russians also have strong financial interests in being a supplier of nuclear reactors and fuel elsewhere in the global market -- and the next U.S. administration could facilitate that objective. Moreover, it also has something to trade with the Russians. While the Bush Administration has made developing and deploying U.S. missile defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic a top priority, the next president could use these potential outposts as a bargaining chip with the Russians. After all, the Bush administration's main argument justifying the deployment of these ballistic missile defenses in Eastern Europe is the threat posed by Iranian missiles armed with nuclear weapons. If that Iranian threat goes away, so does the principal need to deploy these forces. Putin has made this such a symbolic issue that this tradeoff could be portrayed as a great victory for him. To gain the victory, Russia must join real economic sanctions against Iran and its energy sector.

All this suggests that there is leverage that could be used to make negotiations effective. Negotiations with Iran don't exist in a vacuum. Iran must see what it can gain from the talks (civil nuclear power, economic benefits, security assurances, and regional acceptance) but also what it must give up (nuclear weapons, the use of terror and subversion, material support for the Hezbollah and the Hamas militias, and opposition to peace with Israel) in order to get it. If there is no pressure, Iran will read negotiations as acquiescence. Laying extensive groundwork for the almost inevitable negotiations that lay ahead with Iran may not guarantee success, particularly if Iran is determined to have nuclear weapons. But the preparation will give the next American president his or her best chance of stopping Iran's drive towards nuclear armament.

Dennis Ross is counselor and Ziegler distinguished fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of [Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World \(templateC04.php?CID=270\)](#) . ❖

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