Talk to Me

by Dennis Ross **(/experts/dennis-ross)**

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As someone who believes it is essential to restore statecraft to the conduct of American foreign policy, I find it reassuring, not troubling, that a debate should emerge between Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama over the circumstances in which to meet or engage the leaders of rogue states. Don't get me wrong, I am not necessarily in favor in meeting a leader like President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran. There are some leaders who are beyond the pale. But one thing is sure: in exercising statecraft, it is a mistake to exclude some of the tools at our disposal for changing the behavior of states like Iran, Syria, North Korea, or Venezuela.

Not only do we not want to limit the means available for transforming unacceptable or dangerous behaviors internationally, but when we say as a matter of principle that we will not talk to certain states -- or we set conditions that exclude the possibility of such talks -- we often make it harder to persuade others in the international community that our posture is reasonable. We often make ourselves the issue rather than the behavior of those regimes that deserve sanction.

Isolation is an important sanction in international relations. It should be used when states engage in intolerable behaviors such as violating basic international norms, providing support for terrorists, trying to subvert their neighbors or engaging in genocidal behaviors.

Showing that we have tried to engage such regimes to get them to alter their unacceptable behaviors is one way to demonstrate that we have made the effort (or even gone the extra mile) and there is little choice but to employ sanctions -- including, if all other options have been exhausted, the use of force. When George H.W. Bush offered to send Secretary of State James Baker to see Saddam Hussein in Baghdad and to have Saddam's foreign minister come to Washington to see him after the U.N. Security Council had adopted the "all necessary means" resolution in November 1990, he was demonstrating to the international community and our domestic audience that we would exhaust every option before using force -- indeed, that he would not go to war without also having high-level face-to-face meetings with Iraq's leaders.

Such meetings may not be appropriate in all circumstances. But neither should they be excluded in all circumstances. Too often the George W. Bush administration has treated talks or negotiations not as a tool to be used in exercising U.S. influence but as a form of surrender. I have been told by those in the administration that we

cannot talk to Syria because "all they want is Lebanon." Fine, the word "no" is an acceptable part of any negotiation. If the Syrians want to demand Lebanon -- which, of course, they would couch in different terms -- the answer is "no, we are not going to sacrifice Lebanon's interests."

Negotiations are not a form of surrender unless we choose to surrender in the talks. Negotiations do imply, however, a readiness for mutual adjustment. But that is the point: both sides have to adjust.

True, negotiations imply that both sides have interests and both sides needs have to be addressed. True, negotiations also confer recognition. For that reason, it is essential to draw a distinction between states like Iran or Syria and non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas. For non-state actors, recognition is a major achievement. It creates legitimacy, builds momentum, and creates a sense of inevitability about the achievement of their agendas. None of this should be given for free. Thus, while I am not prepared to exclude direct negotiations or meetings as a tool of statecraft with states, it is essential to treat non-state actors differently.

Take the example of Hamas, a non-state actor now dominant in Gaza. We cannot ignore that providing assistance to Gaza now requires someone to deal with Hamas. It need not be us, but total isolation and a cut-off could produce a humanitarian disaster. If we don't want others in the international community to feel compelled to establish normal contacts with Hamas, we need to forge an international consensus on how to deal with the realities in Gaza. There is a need to avoid a humanitarian crisis. There may be a need to permit at least some limited commerce to prevent a complete economic collapse. But if Hamas wants developmental assistance or investment coming to Gaza, they should have to play by the basic rules of the game -- one of which is stopping attacks against Israel. Hamas should have to adjust to the world, not the other way around.

What about our dealings or meetings with the leaders of rogue regimes? Consider the case of Syria. Stakes matter when considering possible meetings. Syria today is a fulcrum: get Syria to turn strategically away from Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas, and Lebanon can become secure and less terrorized, Hamas' leverage among Palestinians could be dramatically reduced, and the possibility of peace between Israel and its neighbors would be enhanced -- not to mention that "jihadists" would also find it harder to move into Iraq. Of course, Bashar Al Assad won't make such a strategic decision for free -- and he may not be prepared to make it at all. Having high-level meetings might be part of a process of testing or exploring whether Syria is willing to make a strategic turn and what would be required to produce it.

In 1989, the George H.W. Bush administration received feelers from Hafez Al Assad about opening a dialogue. A decision was made to test quietly what Assad was willing to do on Lebanon, the Israelis, and his relationship with the Soviets. We opened a back-channel in which I was designated to meet secretly in Europe with a senior representative of the Syrians. We had several secret meetings that were interesting but not productive enough to take to the next level; that would change after Saddam Hussein seized Kuwait.

Clearly, there are many ways to explore the possibilities of having contacts with such regimes to see whether it is possible to change behaviors, what would be required to do so, and whether the contacts should become more open and potentially even involve the president. Could that be done with Hugo Chavez or others? Of course, but we need to ask several questions first: What is to be gained from such meetings? What could be lost? How will it affect our allies or certain key friends? Will the meetings be seen as a sign of our weakness or strength? How is the leader or leadership of the rogue regime likely to read our willingness to meet -- as a sign that we need him more than he needs us or as an indication that this could become a lever for us if his side is not responsive? If nothing else, these and other relevant questions remind us that no meeting should be decided upon without serious preparation.

To be sure, one objective in the aftermath of the Bush administration will be to transform our image and regain the moral high ground internationally. Maybe one way to begin to do so is to be willing meet those Bush would not meet.

But those meetings must still be extensively pre-planned, either by using third parties or direct secret channels to determine whether acceptable agendas and outcomes are possible. (The Nixon opening to China would never have been possible without such an approach.)

So by all means, let the presidential candidates debate who we should meet with and under what circumstances. Let them debate our central objectives internationally and the means we have on our own or through others to achieve those objectives. That is the essence of statecraft. If we want to restore the effectiveness of our foreign policy and our standing in the world, those seeking to lead this country should thrash these issues out.

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 **(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=270)** .

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