

The Case for Game-Changing Diplomacy with Iran

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The next American president must come to office with an Iran plan ready to implement on Day One of his administration. That plan should center on conducting game-changing diplomacy with Iran.

The purpose of game-changing diplomacy is to change the nature of the game so that the United States and the international community are better positioned to succeed, which requires moving the ball further and further into Iran’s court, putting the onus on it to make hard choices. This involves de-emphasizing near-term threats of military action, giving first priority to getting comprehensive verification in place for Iran’s nuclear program, and negotiating directly with Iran on a broad range of issues. This approach would include U.S. proposals designed to be credible to international audiences, including the Iranian people, and prior and ongoing consultation with American friends and allies.

The case for game-changing diplomacy is based on three key judgments. First, military strikes would at best delay Iran’s nuclear program and likely cement rather than weaken Iranian commitment to nuclear weapons. Second, given the differing interests and views of key players including Russia and China, there is no realistic possibility that the current U.S. position — of applying coercive pressure on the Iranian leadership to cause it to give up its right to enrich uranium — will work. Thus, the United States and the international community should pursue the more limited and urgent near-term goal of getting comprehensive verification in place, while continuing to work

to convince Iran that it is in its interests to forego enrichment. Third, if properly vetted with U.S. friends and allies, a diplomatic initiative on Iran will help build U.S. credibility internationally, while at the same time increasing the likelihood of an acceptable resolution to the nuclear standoff. Depending on the Iranian response, it may also serve other American interests and objectives, including stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan and further suppressing al Qaeda.

Game-Changing Diplomacy

Game-changing diplomacy means inviting Iran to the bargaining table without preconditions. Proposals should be structured to be so clearly reasonable that if they do not work out, it is clear to the Iranian people and other audiences in the Middle East that the Iranian government is at fault. The next president should shift from portraying Iran as part of an Axis of Evil to offering to put U.S.-Iranian relations on a fundamentally different course. Rhetoric will be critical: the president’s early statements on Iran will set the tone for the relationship, possibly for years.

Negotiations with Iran should be conducted in multiple fora. A proposal in the nuclear arena for immediate progress might be presented in the P5+1 negotiations or bilaterally, depending on negotiated arrangements with U.S. friends and allies. Regional talks on Iraq would continue and could be expanded. And the United States would propose bilateral talks with Iran on the full range of issues affecting U.S.-Iranian relations.

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Game-changing diplomacy would have six main elements:

1. De-emphasize military threats: Rather than leading Iran to halt uranium enrichment, U.S. military threats have hardened the resolve of the Iranian leadership and enhanced its credibility with the Iranian people, thereby reducing rather than increasing political space for a political deal. Moreover, the greater the threat of U.S. military action, the more utility Iran sees in having a nuclear deterrent of its own.

2. Make comprehensive verification the urgent priority for Iran’s nuclear program, while continuing to press Iran to voluntarily forego enrichment: Under a comprehensive inspection regime, the international community would either conduct international enrichment on Iranian soil or (at least initially) allow Iran to conduct enrichment under tight verification controls. Either would be strongly preferable to unverified Iranian enrichment. If Iran is willing to agree to international enrichment or Iranian enrichment with the full suite of IAEA safeguards and Additional Protocol measures, the risks of an Iranian nuclear bomb would be significantly reduced. While Iran will almost certainly not give up its right to enrich uranium or reprocess plutonium under the NPT, it is possible that as part of a broader agreement it might decide to “unilaterally” suspend enrichment “temporarily.” And it is possible that such a temporary suspension could be extended indefinitely over time.

3. Initiate serious discussions with Iran on Iraq, Afghanistan, al Qaeda and broader Middle Eastern peace: American leaders should not have, or encourage, unrealistic expectations about Iran quickly changing its spots. However, the United States can reasonably ask Iran to support the integration of Iraqi militias into Iraq’s political processes, the inclusions of Hamas and Hezbollah in their respective political systems in Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, and a renunciation of violent solutions in the process of moving toward such inclusion. The long-term goal should be to move Iran away from its support of armed resistance and the maintenance of militias.

4. Offer to establish bilateral relations: The need for direct talks can be understood by considering a hypothetical: If Iran achieves a nuclear weapons capability, it will be essential for the United States to have direct communications with the regime as it does with Russia and China, and for that matter with North Korea. If the United States would do so for a nuclear Iran, why should it not do so for a non-nuclear Iran?

5. Offer the possibility of relief from sanctions and over time additional economic and political incentives to provide Iran the chance to join the international community: The Iranian reward for cooperation on nuclear issues, terrorism, and Middle East peace — integration into the international community — may be seen by many in the Iranian leadership as a double-edged sword. It would advance Iran economically, but it could also strengthen moderates in Iran

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and over time increase pressure for political reform. Therefore, while the United States and the international community should certainly offer Iran the possibility for integration, it should not expect the Iranian leadership to jump quickly at the opportunity.

6. Condition incentives and progress in bilateral relations on Iranian behavior:

The next president should offer to conduct negotiations with Iran across a wide range of issues. There would not be preconditions for conducting the negotiations, but American positions in the negotiations would depend on Iranian actions. The United States negotiated with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and did not precondition participation on the U.S.S.R. agreeing to specific outcomes. The Bush administration is now negotiating with North Korea despite its development and testing of nuclear weapons. It is past time to negotiate directly with Iran.

Enabling and Backstopping Game-Changing Diplomacy

Three key enablers will be critical to successful game-changing diplomacy: developing and maintaining a strong international coalition, building domestic support in the United States, and creating bargaining leverage. Game-changing diplomacy must be backstopped by continuing containment and deterrence of Iran, and preparing for a possible return to coercive diplomacy. The United States must also prepare for the possibility of significant military action should it be necessary in the future, for example if Iran crosses redlines such as the transfer of nuclear materials.

The early part of 2009 will likely be consumed by internal U.S. discussions, consultations with friends and allies, and preparation for negotiations. While an initial offer should be made as early as possible in 2009, given the timing of Iranian elections in mid-2009, the Iranian side may be largely preoccupied with domestic issues and therefore respond slowly. The United States must be prepared for either Iranian agreement or rejection – or perhaps most likely a conflicted and ambiguous response.

If Iran accepts intrusive verification of all nuclear activities, nuclear risks to the international community will be reduced. If it is willing to go further on nuclear issues and in other areas, such as cooperating on Iraq and Afghanistan and curtailing its support of terrorism, Iranians will benefit greatly by the elimination of sanctions and increased integration into the international system. If Iranian leaders spurn diplomacy, the stage will be set for gaining broad agreement for tougher measures to inflict increased pressure on Iran to cooperate – as long as the United States has first developed the necessary international support.

While the next president must move quickly to start game-changing diplomacy, he must also assure that U.S. policy takes a long-term perspective. The next steps the United States takes on Iran’s nuclear program will be just that: next steps, not final answers. By changing the nature of the game, an American diplomatic initiative will significantly increase the prospects for both near-term and long-term success.

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About the Project

Dealing with Iran will be a key challenge for the United States in the coming years. In order to explore the full range of options available to the next president, in early 2008 the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) convened a bipartisan group comprised of experts on foreign policy and national security, retired military personnel, former diplomats and other government officials, and specialists on Iran and the region. This Expert Group met four times to discuss and debate papers addressing a range of U.S. policy options. Ambassador Dennis Ross presented a paper on diplomatic strategies for dealing with Iran, and Dr. Suzanne Maloney wrote on Iranian perspectives and potential responses. Dr. Ashton Carter evaluated various U.S. military options, and Dr. Vali Nasr described likely Iranian reactions and other potential impacts. Ambassador Richard Haass considered the challenges of living with a nuclear Iran. Although much debate remains over policy choices, the final report from this project, *Iran: Assessing U.S. Strategic Options*, reflects broad agreement among participants on the need for a pragmatic U.S. approach.

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