

# Why Supporting Diplomacy with Iran is the Strong Position

There has been an unfortunate tendency under the George W. Bush presidency to portray diplomacy – and specifically the idea of comprehensive talks with Iran – as a sign of weakness. But as former New York Times correspondent Stephen Kinzer found during a month-long, cross-country tour promoting negotiations with Iran, there are powerful arguments to the contrary. Many are drawn from the history of Iran, the Middle East and the wider world.

This document is an attempt to distill the arguments Mr. Kinzer honed as he spoke to public audiences, interviewers and editorial boards across the U.S. It gives verbal ammunition to conscientious public officials and others who see the need for diplomacy.

Willingness to talk to one's enemy is a sign of strength. Fleeing from such encounters is a sign of weakness. It reflects a lack of self-confidence and damages American strategic interests.

Advocating negotiation does not imply minimizing the growing threats from Iran. On the contrary, Iran's continuing nuclear program and its other worrying actions are precisely what makes negotiating so urgent.

**1 You don't need to negotiate with your friends. Diplomacy is and has always been most important in dealing with rivals or enemies.** President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger understood this when they made their dramatic overture to Communist China in the midst of the Cold War. They understood that the world does not always have to be shaped the way it is now, that we can move the pieces on the global chessboard. We need that level of imagination again.

**2 The United States must engage Iran.** Iran's destabilizing threats to Middle East security, including its support for violent militias and its disturbing nuclear program, make direct negotiations urgent. The way Iran's leaders repress their country's democratic movement adds to this urgency.

Iran now is like Germany after WWII – a large, unstable nation in the middle of a volatile region. At that time, the U.S. had the choice of either working with Germany and helping it to prosper or isolating it and limiting its development. We ultimately chose to pursue the Marshall Plan, which gave Germany a place in the world system and

encouraged it to develop and prosper. The result has been spectacularly successful. We should follow a similar course with Iran.

**3 Iran's influence in the region is a reality that cannot be wished away.** It is delusional to expect that Iran will stop influencing Iraq. Iran and Iraq are neighbors. They are both predominantly Shi'ite. Iran is the largest power in the region. Iran will continue to have an influence. This is not necessarily bad. Iran has not historically had territorial ambitions against neighboring states, and it shares with the U.S. a fervent desire for stability in Iraq.

**4 Iran's democratic movement is pleading with the U.S. to stop threatening Iran and begin negotiating.** Civil rights campaigners ranging from the exiled dissident Akbar Ganji to the heroic Nobel Prize winning lawyer Shirin Ebadi are among those urging talks. These are Iranians who represent what we think of as democratic American values; we should listen to them.

**5 Iran acts rationally and is not reckless.** The recent National Intelligence Estimate concluded

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that Iranian leaders are “guided by a cost-benefit approach.” That suggests they would be promising negotiating partners.

In 2003, Iran made an offer to negotiate with the U.S. The offer included a list of topics Iran was willing to discuss, including the Iranian nuclear program, Iran’s support for militant groups in the Middle East and even possible recognition of Israel in exchange for creation of a Palestinian state. In the five years since we refused to pursue that offer, the crisis between our countries has steadily intensified. It intensifies a bit more each day we refuse to negotiate.

**6** If negotiations begin, it may turn out that not only are the U.S. and Iran not fated to be enemies forever, but that they actually have many strategic interests in common. Iran offers the United States a chance to reshape the global order with a single bold stroke that could decisively advance American interests.

**7** Iran has a vital interest in making Iraq a stable neighbor. No other country has more power to achieve this goal. Iran’s facilitation of a truce between the Sadrist and the Iraqi government in Basra in late March 2008 demonstrated this ability. Iran can help ensure a new eruption of terrorism does not follow a US withdrawal.

**8** Iran can also help stabilize its other neighbor, Afghanistan. Iranian and US leaders have already cooperated, orchestrating the Bonn Agreement, from which the government of President Hamid Karzai emerged. Iran has an extensive web of contacts there, built up over generations.

**9** Iran shares an interest in a stable, terrorist-free Pakistan. Iranian leaders are terrified that Pakistan could break up, with a nuclear-armed, Taliban-style regime emerging there.

**10** Iran is a bitter enemy of the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Our two countries can work together to isolate and weaken them.

**11** Iran needs a great-power ally, and would prefer the United States. If the U.S. continues to refuse to deal with Iran, it will turn either to Russia or China.

**12** Iran is the only Muslim country in the Middle East in which most people are pro-American. This pro-American feeling is a huge strategic asset for us. It is a foundation on which we can build a long-term friendship. But it will evaporate instantly if the U.S. attacks.

We should seek an accord that recognizes the aspirations of the Iranian people. The Helsinki accords of 1975 calmed Cold War passions and also promoted human

rights. They can be a model for the agreement we would seek with Iran.

**13** Iranians are pro-Jewish. Many Iranians have a deep-seated admiration for Jews that goes back millennia, to the days when King Cyrus freed Jews from their Babylonian captivity. Creative diplomacy might build on this affinity to reduce the dangerously high tension between Iran and Israel.

**14** Iran’s oil industry is in disrepair and needs foreign investment. It needs billions of dollars in investment, and US companies have the expertise and capital to do the job. If the US does not do it, other countries will.

**15** Diplomacy costs very little, compared to war. Negotiation may not work, but it is neither moral nor strategically wise to launch a war without exhausting all peaceful alternatives. Negotiating is such a low-cost option that it seems folly not to try.

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