

Conflict Prevention Options with Iran

The Bush Administration's 2006 National Security Strategy details a 3D approach including development, diplomacy, and defense. The 3D Security Initiative promotes conflict prevention and peacebuilding as preventive security strategies. This Policy Brief was developed in collaboration with conflict prevention experts and organizations working in Iran.

The U.S. national interest requires a responsible, farsighted problem-solving dialogue with Iran. A regional diplomatic approach will lay the best groundwork for addressing the root causes and protecting U.S. interests in regional security. A bipartisan majority of Americans want robust diplomacy rather than military engagement with Iran. Military experts warn a military strike would have disastrous consequences for U.S. interests in the region. The current military build-up in the Persian Gulf and antagonistic rhetoric further exacerbates the regional crisis.

This policy brief focuses on diplomatic frameworks for negotiation and diplomatic channels with Iran to reach sustainable solutions to the current crisis. It explores possible steps to restore diplomatic relations between the U.S. and Iran.

Diplomatic Frameworks

Conflict prevention processes address the root causes of conflict by identifying ways to satisfy deeper interests underlying public positions. Negotiations requiring wholesale compliance have a high risk of failure. Negotiation on these core interests is more likely to bring positive results.

- **Move Focus from Iran's Nuclear Program to the Promotion of Regional Security.** U.S. core interests are best met through broader regional diplomatic engagement to increase regional security rather than on narrow negotiation demands on Iran to stop uranium enrichment and militarily aiding U.S. adversaries. These issues require a broader range of stakeholders in regional problem-solving.
- **Address Iranian Concerns about National Sovereignty.** Many Iranians see their nuclear program as an important symbol of national sovereignty, regional influence, and technical competence. Governments often choose seemingly less-rational options of national sovereignty, over economic and security interests.. Moderate Iranian leaders and reformers can best influence Iranian policy if they can support diplomatic options which allow Iran to uphold national sovereignty. U.S. diplomatic engagement with Iran should explore these underlying symbolic interests.
- **Take Regime Change off the Table.** Diplomatic problem-solving is hampered by the perceived U.S goal of regime change in Iran, which strikes an historical chord among Iranians given U.S. intervention in Iranian politics, particularly in 1953. The lack of U.S. response to Iran's diplomatic overtures in Afghanistan and Iraq reinforces this perception. Due to these factors, the focus on regime change inadvertently strengthens Iranian leadership.

- **Contribute to the Development of Confidence-Building Measures.** Small, unilateral confidence-building measures (CBMs) build trust for more substantial negotiations, and undermine antagonistic leaders. These can increase the possibility of international monitoring of Iran's nuclear program and persuade Iran to halt its military support of terrorist organizations. U.S. leaders should consider a wider set of options for Iran; developing ways of symbolically recognizing Iranian national sovereignty and regional influence could pave the way for more substantial diplomatic successes.

Diplomatic Channels

U.S. leaders can help expand both public and back-channel diplomatic engagement with Iran. Multi-track diplomacy builds lines of communication and relationship between political leaders, religious groups, journalists, academics, athletes, artists, youth, women and other civil society leaders and citizens from different sectors of society.

- **Support a Permanent Forum for Security and Cooperation in the Middle East.** The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) helped bring about an end to the Cold War. A similar permanent forum could be created in the Middle East to build long-term capacity and political support for cooperative security in the Middle East. Regional and civil society-based organizations should be included in this Forum, which could discuss for example whether sanctions are helping or hurting the Iranian reform movement.
- **Find Better Ways to Support the Iranian Reform Movement.** U.S. public support for reformers in Iran is counterproductive. Human rights in Iran are deteriorating as Iranian leaders justify suppressing civil society groups on national security grounds and for their ties to the U.S. U.S. leaders should work with the international community and U.S.-based Iranians to find other ways of supporting reformers.
- **Expand and Support Multi-Track Diplomatic Initiatives.** Consider exchanges between bi-partisan Members of the U.S. Congress and policymakers in the Iranian Majlis, perhaps through international organizations.

Establishing direct lines of communication between a broad range of government and civil society leaders in the U.S. and Iran could help deescalate tensions and amplify the voices of moderates to find diplomatic paths out of the crisis.

Unofficial diplomatic initiatives contribute to successful official diplomacy. Religious-based organizations, such as [Fellowship of Reconciliation](#) and the [National Council of Churches](#), already have a solid track record of diplomatic initiatives in Iran.

- **Create Conflict Prevention Taskforces.** Bring together mid-level political, religious, business and academic leaders with the aim of conducting, in workshop format, a joint analysis of the opportunities for a sustainable political solution. Unofficial diplomatic taskforces have a successful history of developing creative solutions. Such a taskforce might explore how to best acknowledge and address historical grievances and find symbolic opportunities for confidence-building and back-channel negotiations.