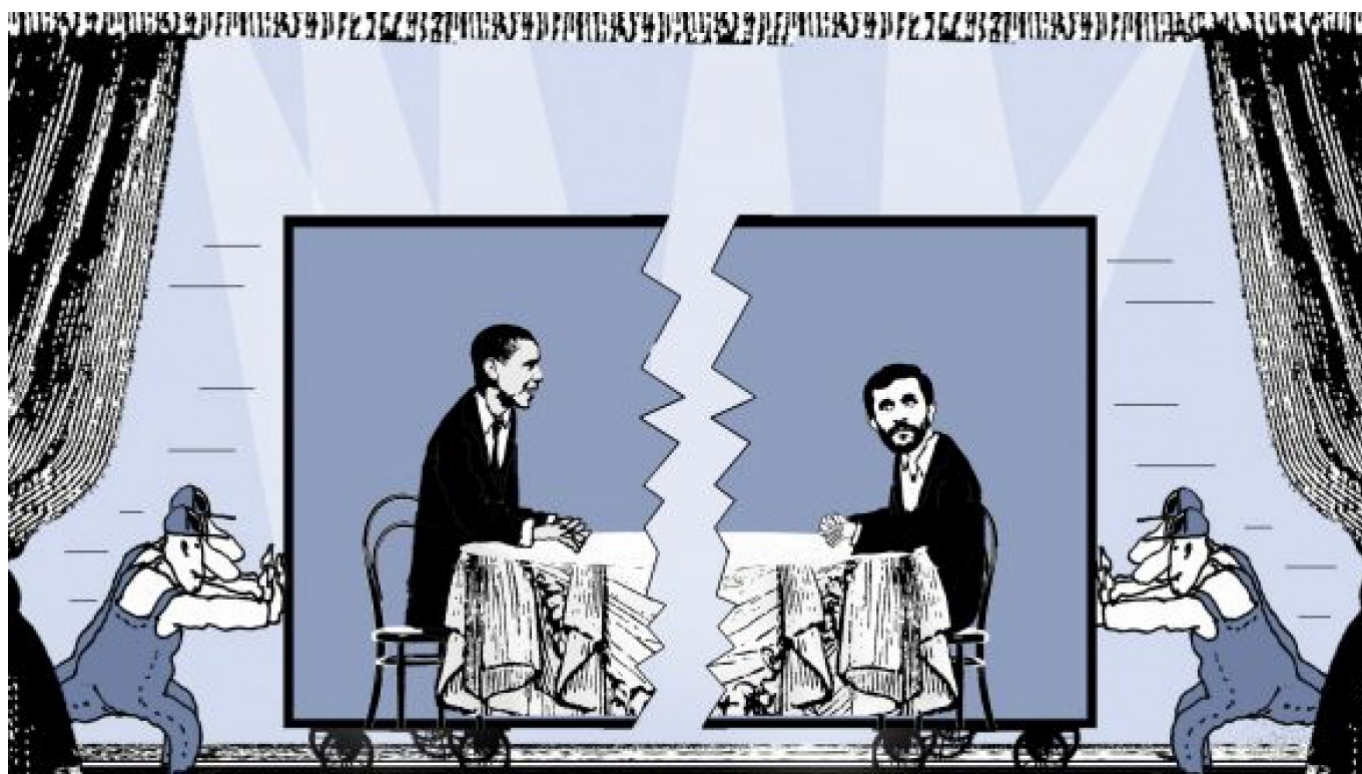


The Nixon Option for Iran

By [William Luers](#)

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Rearranging the deck chairs would not have saved the Titanic. Nor did the endless debates on the shape of the table in the Vietnam negotiations advance the effort to end that malign conflict. Nevertheless, many U.S. presidents have successfully redesigned talks with adversaries in bold new ways to strengthen national security without war. Such boldness is now needed in the negotiations over Iran's nuclear program.

In 1933, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt negotiated personally with Soviet Foreign Minister Maxim Litvinov to open diplomatic relations between the two countries. U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower invited Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to the United States in 1959 to open the eyes of the first Soviet leader ever to visit the country. The bilateral U.S.-China talks in the 1960s were fruitless until U.S. President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger opened a different, more direct discussion through the auspices of Pakistan.

International negotiations with Iran over its nuclear program also need a new concept and broader agenda. The Istanbul meeting last month concluded on a positive note. Both sides decided to find a way to avoid the pattern of mutual recrimination and sterile exchanges.

The door is now open to an initial agreement with modest goals.

But don't count on a new era without some form of direct U.S.-Iran discussions. The talks with the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany, or P5+1, are formulaic, stagnant and not likely to achieve any breakthrough on their own. The Iranians feel outnumbered by diverse participants with varying agendas. The United States needs to reshape the environment to make it easier for Iran to compromise.

The United States should press for bilateral talks. One lesson provided by former U.S. presidents is the value of direct, high-level contacts with key adversaries. Of course, a face-to-face meeting between U.S. President Barack Obama and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad seems absurd to imagine — now. But could any meeting have seemed more absurd in 1969 than the 1971 meeting between Nixon and Chinese leader Mao Zedong? The United States and Iran need to set a path toward broad bilateral discussions on worldviews, regional security and plans to improve mutual understanding to minimize differences.

Even without direct U.S.-Iran talks now, the current negotiations need reshaping. The P5+1 should continue to negotiate with Iran on its uranium-enrichment program, while the International Atomic Energy Agency, or IAEA, should negotiate with Iran on strengthening the transparency of its nuclear program. The Iranians want to resolve their problems directly with the IAEA and to avoid negotiating under the cloud of UN Security Council resolutions, which impose sanctions on Iran to force suspension of enrichment.

This situation suggests a phased approach. First, during the talks in Baghdad, the P5+1 might seek an early confidence-building agreement by which Iran voluntarily ceases enriching to 20 percent content in the U-235 fissile isotope and blends down or ships out their stockpile of such uranium, which is closer to weapons grade. They might also seek a standstill on the deep underground enrichment facility at Fordow in exchange for provision of fuel rods for Iran's research reactor and a freeze on some sanctions.

Second, the P5+1 could then agree to some Iranian enrichment as an incentive for Iran to conclude a parallel agreement with the IAEA on greater transparency. These parallel steps would reshape the process to achieve a key U.S. objective: ensuring that Iran abides by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's religious decree against nuclear weapons.

Third, both sides will need to outline the long-term objectives of the negotiations. As the IAEA presses Iran for agreements on greater transparency, Iran wants to know where such agreements might lead, particularly regarding sanctions.

Iranians claim that each time they move toward cooperation with the United States, a new problem emerges to block improved relations. Iran wants to know which sanctions might be delayed, frozen or lifted in exchange for current and future concessions, fearing that Washington will continue to impose sanctions on human rights, security or other grounds.

The United States, for its part, views Iran as a duplicitous and unreliable negotiator that is committed to nuclear weapons and unserious about talks. The time has come to test Iran's intentions by reaching something like the two-phased agreements outlined here — a longer-term, step-by-step process with reciprocal actions in which each side must give something

to get what it needs.

If Obama were to take the lead in reshaping the setting and the process by which the United States and others talk with Iran, progress could become easier. The Istanbul talks opened the door to an initial — if incremental — breakthrough agreement. Washington now has an opportunity to establish new ways to explore common ground and reach a more durable political solution.

William Luers served as U.S. ambassador to Czechoslovakia and Venezuela and president of the United Nations Association from 1999 to 2009. Thomas Pickering, under secretary of state for political affairs in the administration of U.S. President Bill Clinton, served as U.S. ambassador to Russia, Israel, Jordan and the United Nations. © Project Syndicate

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