

The diplomatic option

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The amphibious assault ship USS Bataan transits the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has threatened to shut down the strait, choking off Persian Gulf oil exports. [Attribution Some rights reserved](#) by [Official U.S. Navy Imagery](#).

The Republican candidates for the presidential nomination can't resist "taking on" Iran. "If we reelect Barack Obama," Mitt Romney says, "Iran will have a nuclear weapon. And if we elect Mitt Romney . . . they will not have a nuclear weapon." Rick Santorum promises to bomb Iran if it doesn't dismantle its nuclear reactor in Qom. This makes for good campaign rhetoric, since its aim is to make President Obama look weak.

For his part, President Obama seems to want to avoid military confrontation with Iran. Along with Congress, he has opted for stronger economic sanctions against it. But this strategy backs Iran into a corner, making it even more resolved to develop a nuclear program. In response, Iran warns that it could shut down the Strait of Hormuz, which would choke off many of the region's oil exports. This would lead to a catastrophe of another kind: soaring gas prices and a plummeting world economy. It would also likely ensure that Obama would be a one-term president.

There is another option, the diplomatic route. As Iranian expert Trita Parsi has pointed out, the U.S. did enter into diplomatic talks with Iran in 2009. The talks broke down because the U.S. was seeking quick results and didn't have the patience to endure for the long haul. Only six months later, Turkey and Brazil picked up the baton and were able to get Iran to agree to what the U.S. wanted: exchange of its

low-enriched uranium for fuel to be used in a medical research reactor. But the agreement came too late for the U.S., which had already moved to strengthen sanctions against Iran.

The U.S. could learn from the Turkey-Brazil efforts, says Parsi. As one Turkish official said, "When you put intimidation and coercion ahead of respect, it falls apart. Iran listens because we respect them." Turkey and Brazil realized the complexity of negotiating with Iran and chose to talk with all the power brokers in the country, not just the people at the top. They also broadened the agenda beyond Iran's nuclear ambitions to include issues like human rights—and negotiated the release of a French prisoner. This action has particular salience since Iran recently accused an American-born prisoner of espionage and condemned him to death.

The U.S. might also press for a nuclear-free Middle East. This would require Israel to admit that it has nuclear weapons and then to give them up, a seemingly impossible task. Yet a majority of Israelis favor a nuclear-free Middle East. Many Arab countries would favor such a plan as well, since they're nervous about both Israeli and Iranian intentions.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently admitted that the U.S. is considering opening talks with the Taliban (backdoor conversations are already happening). If the U.S. can talk with the much-despised Taliban, why can't it talk with Iran?