

Dialogue with Adversaries

Facing serious dangers from nuclear weapons from Iran and North Korea, the United States should be willing to negotiate bilaterally with those two nations. Success in diffusing these threats will require multilateral assistance from other world powers, but our willingness to treat Iran and North Korea with dignity and respect could go a long way in disarming those nations militarily and diplomatically.

My Senate assignments on the Intelligence Committee and Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations have provided me the opportunity to meet with Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, Palestinian Chairman Yasser Arafat, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Cuban President Fidel Castro, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, and others.

Those meetings have shown me that people are people, even at the highest levels of government. They are interested in a candid dialogue. They accept differences and disagreements as long as the tone is courteous. Regrettably, the worldwide “ugly Americans” reputation is encouraged, in my opinion, by our unwillingness to at least meet and talk one on one without preconditions.

Sun-tzu’s advice to “keep your friends close and your enemies closer” is a good admonition to keep in mind as we approach our relationships in the world. Admittedly, it is difficult to accord respect and dignity to countries such as Iran and North Korea, whom we have branded as part of the axis of evil. President Ronald Reagan invited Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev to a dialogue weeks after labeling the Soviet Union the “Evil Empire.” It may not work, but it is certainly worth a try when the stakes are so high and our other strenuous efforts are not bearing fruit.

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Perhaps irrelevant, my first assignment as assistant district attorney in Philadelphia was interviewing inmates for commutation of sentences to life imprisonment from death in the electric chair for first-degree murder. That experience taught me that you can have a meaningful dialogue with anyone.

Iran

There is no doubt that Iran has been trying to flex its muscles since 1979 when the shah was deposed. Iran is a proud nation with a rich history. In asserting its right not to be restrained in developing nuclear technology, Iran seeks to be a world power, and its leaders think that status and respect can be achieved by becoming a nuclear power. A good starting point for U.S.-Iranian relations would be to treat them as equals for the purpose of negotiations. It does not give them the same status as being a nuclear power, but it could be a good step forward if mighty America would treat them with respect while negotiating.

I have tried to visit Iran since the Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988. I have not yet succeeded. For many years, however, I have reached out to Iranians such as the former ambassador to the United Nations in New York, Seyed Muhammad Hadi Nejad Hosseinian, and his successor, Muhammad Javad Zarif, in an effort to foster an exchange of visits by members of Congress to Iran and Iranian parliamentarians to the United States to try to open dialogue between our two countries. I thought my efforts finally came to fruition in January 2004 when plans were made for U.S. members of Congress to meet with Iranian parliamentarians in Geneva. Unfortunately, Tehran later rescinded the invitation, declaring it was “not on their agenda.”

Terrorism, military nuclear capabilities, energy, Iraq, and the Israeli-Palestinian dilemma are all major issues confronting the United States and the world. All of these challenges are intrinsically linked with Iran, and none can be addressed or resolved without an appreciation for Iran’s role in each. Undertaking this venture will not be easy, but in the words of Ambassador L. Bruce Laingen, the senior U.S. official held hostage in Tehran for 444 days, “Diplomats should talk, even with our foes. That’s what we do. It doesn’t make sense for us not to talk to the Iranians. I’m not saying that I would confidently predict a breakthrough, but there must be some sort of dialogue.”¹

The Problem with Outsourcing Foreign Policy

The United States has responded to Iran’s challenge by correctly recounting Iran’s dubious nuclear behavior and disregard for the international community but has avoided direct dialogue with Tehran. I commend the administra-

tion's change in course, deciding to deal with Iran through multilateral talks, and view it as confirmation that a change in our tactics is overdue. Prior U.S. policy committed to dealing with Iran via the UN Security Council and the Europeans. Prospects are dim, however, for garnering support from China and Russia for a UN resolution with teeth. Russia's and China's significant energy, military, and political interests restrict their ability to support tough action against Iran and represent a significant barrier to a successful resolution vis-à-vis the UN.

Although the Europeans are supportive of tough action against Iran, some are hesitant to continue down a path on which they feel the United States is not fully committed and not an active partner. Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan have all indicated that the United States needs to be directly engaged in the Iranian effort. My colleague, Senator

Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.), in his May 8, 2006, *Financial Times* op-ed, highlighted the importance of U.S. involvement: "U.S. allies will support tough action against Iran only if they are confident the U.S. is serious about achieving a negotiated, diplomatic solution. Continued unwillingness of the United States to engage Iran will make other states hesitate to support, and possibly oppose, these tougher measures."

Periodically, I read that military options are some of these tougher actions that may be considered to confront Iran. Although the option should not be removed from the table, military engagement will do nothing to solve the litany of problems between our nations. We should only consider going to war when we have exhausted all options. Today, we are not there. In that light, I commend President George W. Bush for his May 24, 2006, statement that "our primary objective is to solve this problem diplomatically." I believe diplomatic options remain, and it is precisely these options that can prevent conflict.

Why has it taken so long to consider talking to the Iranian regime? Richard Armitage, former deputy secretary of state, told *Time* in a May 22, 2006, article that

it appears that the Administration thinks that dialogue equates with weakness, that we've called these regimes "evil" and therefore we won't talk to them. Some people say talking would legitimize the regimes. But we're not trying to change the regimes, and they're already legitimized in the eyes of the international community. So we ought to have enough confidence in our ability as diplomats to go eye to eye with people—even though we disagree in the strongest possible way—and come away without losing anything.

I encourage the administration to agree to negotiations with Iran without preconditions.

To be certain, we find ourselves in this position in no small part due to Tehran's deceit and arrogance toward the international community. Nevertheless, U.S. policy toward Iran has played into the hands of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the hard-line radicals in Tehran. Although the extent of Ahmadinejad's power remains unclear, the U.S. administration's discussions of regime change and refusal to rule out using nuclear weapons against the Iranian regime have bolstered its position. Such U.S. rhetoric, coupled with other policies, enhances Tehran's ability to tap nationalistic sentiments to solidify support for a nuclear weapons program, effectively taking the focus away from its constituents' discontent with failed domestic policies, most notably Ahmadinejad's poor stewardship of the economy. To some degree, we are the distraction buttressing his position. In this perfect storm, Ahmadinejad's rise on the wave of oil revenues and growing global discontent with U.S. policies has afforded him the forum, confidence, and leverage to challenge the United States and the international community.

Deciphering and Reaching beyond Tehran

It is still unknown what level of power and influence Ahmadinejad holds within Iran. Some accounts indicate that Iran's elite, and even some hard-line officials, are critical of Ahmadinejad's aggressive handling of the nuclear issue, whereas others report that he has amassed significant power. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that much of the power in Tehran does not rest with the president, but with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the mullahs.

Khamenei installed Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, an advocate of rapprochement with the United States, as chairman of the Expediency Council, a senior position as arbiter between the legislature and constitutional court. Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad's adversary in the 2005 election, is thought to have been given the position to act as a counterweight to Ahmadinejad. Some accounts suggest that Rafsanjani has taken an increased profile in Iranian diplomacy, a move not likely done without the coordination and approval of Khamenei.

Despite the many factions within Iran's leadership, Ahmadinejad, former president Muhammad Khatami, Khamenei, and Rafsanjani all advocate a nuclear Iran. In addition, although Rafsanjani is considered to be a relative moderate, he has still labeled Israel as "the most hideous occurrence in history," which the Muslim world "will vomit out from its midst." Regrettably, these are the views held by those with whom we must engage.

Notwithstanding Iran's leadership, we must constantly remind ourselves of those over whom they rule. The United States should effectively communicate our desire for a prosperous Middle East, free of tyranny and oppression, that respects human rights and rule of law and where governments

represent and reflect the desires of those they govern. Further, we should be frank when conveying our concerns and those of the world to the Iranian people over specific problems threatening peace and security. Nearly three-quarters of Iran's 70 million people are under the age of 30. Placing our disagreements with Iran's leadership aside, not letting these people know what we stand for and what we value would be irresponsible. The United States should focus on this emerging population and those who yearn for increased freedom and reform.

According to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a 2002 poll conducted by the Majlis, Iran's legislature, revealed that three-quarters of Iranians favored rapprochement with the United States and that nearly one-half believed U.S. policy was "to some extent correct." In typical Iranian fashion, the two pollsters were later sentenced to nine years for "publishing nonscientific research." It is precisely examples such as this that fuel disdain amongst Iranians for their leadership. Bush poignantly illustrated the plight and underscored the hopes of the Iranian people in a July 12, 2002, statement: "The people of Iran want the same freedoms, human rights, and opportunities as people around the world. Their government should listen to their hopes. ... As Iran's people move towards a future defined by greater freedom, greater tolerance, they will have no better friend than the United States of America."

When Ahmadinejad or any Iranian leader calls into question the virtue and value of liberal democracy, we should respond by touting its successes. We should talk about our commitment to rule of law, individual liberties, and freedom of press and speech. Are not freedom of speech, press, and association liberties that the Iranian people would enjoy? Would those incarcerated in Iran for criticizing the government not wish to be freed? Most importantly, liberal democracy has better arguments than theocracy, and we should not shy away from this debate. Perhaps a crash course in the history of authoritarian failures would be the best place to start.

U.S. policy has played into the hands of Ahmadinejad and hard-line radicals.

An Opportunity for Dialogue

The concept of dialogue with Iran is not unfamiliar to this debate. Both sides have previously taken one step toward the table and one step back. Reports indicate that, in 2003, Iran, with the blessing of Khamenei, secretly proposed talks with the United States on Iraq and Iranian nuclear ambitions. That same year, the United States offered to send a high-level delegation to Tehran following the earthquake in Bam, only to be rebuffed by Iran. Unfor-

tunately, this tentative shuffle never amounted to anyone sitting down at the table at the same time.

There are some indications, vague as they may be, that Tehran may again be interested in establishing dialogue with Washington. For example, on May 8, 2006, Ahmadinejad sent an 18-page letter to Bush. Following that letter, *USA Today* reported that Ali Larijani, Iran's top nuclear negotiator, said in a

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television interview that “[p]erhaps, it could lead to a new diplomatic opening. It needs to be given some time.” Further, according to *Time*, a senior Iranian official described the letter as being designed to offer “new ways for getting out of the current, fragile international situation.”

Muhammad Nahavandian, a close adviser to Iran's top nuclear negotiator, was reportedly in the United States for a few weeks during that same month. According to *Newsweek*, he told Robert Malley, a former Clinton administration official, that Khomeini was eager to broaden Tehran's tentative cooperation with Washington on Iraq and other subjects and that he was “putting out feelers.” In addition to these developments, I agreed with Bush's decision to authorize the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, to engage in discussions with Tehran, even if they were initially restricted to Iraq. In time, it is my hope that such discussions will lead to a broader dialogue.

What is most significant in our recent dealings with Iran is the offer for dialogue and how the offer in itself outweighs any terms set by either side. Although Tehran responded to our interest in joining talks by dismissing our conditions that enrichment be suspended, the offer clearly had an impact. On June 2, 2006, Saeed Laylaz, an Iran analyst living in Tehran, confirmed these sentiments to the *Washington Post*: “The fact that [Secretary of State Condoleezza] Rice has announced the United States' willingness to hold talks with Iran is more important than the conditions she set.” The administration's decision to consider dialogue has had a great impact in moving our countries closer to resolving our issues. As reported in that *Washington Post* article, “Javad Vaeidi, the Iranian Supreme Council's deputy head for international affairs, agreed that the United States' overture was, in itself, a positive step.”

The consequences of an Iran with nuclear weapons would be grave. Tehran does not seem willing to cease uranium enrichment voluntarily or submit to the IAEA. The Europeans are running into walls in the form of China and Russia in the UN Security Council, and it is apparent that the UN has not been able to alter Iran's behavior. It is precisely Iran's ambitions that may drive regional powers such as Egypt, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia to pursue nuclear ambitions.

The Middle East is already a volatile neighborhood. The phrase “adding fuel to the fire” does not approach describing what the introduction of nuclear weapons would mean, not only for the fate of the region but for the world.

The United States is not to blame for Iran’s devious and deceptive behavior, nor their arrogance and defiance of the international community. I have called on the international community to act aggressively in dealing with Iran’s involvement in the crisis in southern Lebanon. As I stated on the floor of the U.S. Senate on July 20, 2006, “The United Nations ought to call Iran and Syria on the carpet to explain their conduct in backing Hezbollah, in providing personnel to do more than train Hezbollah, more than advisers being integral parts of the military offensive of Hezbollah.”

Twenty-seven years of silence broken only by a few whispers, however, has not worked and has left us in the dangerous predicament in which we find ourselves today. All the while, the United States has been watching from the sidelines. Something has to give. Current U.S. policy does not include direct talks with Iran with no preconditions. Perhaps it is time to stop passing notes to Tehran via the Swiss and to sit down and start talking.

North Korea

Just as the United States has been criticized by its European allies for not dealing directly with Iran, we have encountered similar criticism from Russia, China, and South Korea for not directly engaging North Korea. It is clear, as pointed out by John McLaughlin, former deputy director of the Central Intelligence Agency, that “the North seems sure to engage us. It could be across a table. It could be with the consequences of its negative behavior or its own ability.” The United States should focus on the table in hopes of preventing the consequences.

Today, North Korea exists in the dark, both literally and figuratively. The regime of Kim Jong-il actively pursues an unsupervised and unregulated nuclear program. This program and its long-range missiles pose a grave threat to regional security and represent a hostile posture toward the United States. Meanwhile, the 23 million residents of North Korea remain among the poorest and most repressed in the world.

A satellite photo taken of the earth at night reveals lights across much of the populated world. Yet North Korea, with the exception of a tiny dot denoting Pyongyang, is totally black. Ironically, this blank spot is symbolic for just about everything about this country. It is a massive blind spot with very little known in the United States or elsewhere about exactly what is going on inside its borders. Even Kim’s nuclear progress was unverified until recently.

What we do know, as Esther Pan of the Council on Foreign Relations observes, is that North Korea has “developed a nuclear arsenal of an esti-

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mated six to eight nuclear weapons and continued to enrich nuclear fuel; removed its nuclear program from all international treaties, obligations, and safeguards; decided when to negotiate and when to drop out, and then set the terms for returning to negotiations; [and] steadily increased the amount of unconditional aid it receives from international sources,” including more than \$1 billion from the United States over the last 10 years. On October 9,

2006, North Korea claimed to have conducted an underground nuclear test. Given this disconcerting state of affairs, it may be appropriate for the United States to deal directly with North Korea.

I commend the administration for enlisting North Korea’s neighbors to engage Pyongyang. Regrettably, that regime has refused to return to the six-party talks with China, Japan, Russia,

South Korea, and the United States. On May 17, 2006, I was pleased to read in the *New York Times* that “Bush’s top advisers have recommended a broad new approach to dealing with North Korea that would include beginning negotiations on a peace treaty, even while efforts to dismantle the country’s nuclear program are still under way.” As reported, such a deal would be contingent on North Korea returning to the six-party talks, something I hope the North will do. Regardless, it is possible to address North Korea both in multilateral and bilateral fora.

On June 1, 2006, Pyongyang extended an invitation to the United States for talks, which Washington declined. This may have been an opportunity worth taking. As Kevin O’Neill and David Albright conclude in their book, *Solving the North Korea Nuclear Puzzle*, “Serious misunderstandings, missed opportunities, and false expectations have often plagued the U.S.–North Korean relationship.” In my opinion, dialogue is one way to avoid these pitfalls in the future.

The problems in our bilateral relationship do not end with North Korea’s nuclear ambitions. North Korea’s human rights record is deplorable. The Department of State reported on March 8, 2006, that “the government’s human rights record remained extremely poor, and the regime continued to commit numerous serious abuses. The regime [has] subjected citizens to rigid controls over many aspects of their lives.” The report cited extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detention, life-threatening prison conditions, torture, and forced abortions and infanticide, as well as denial of freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly, and association. The North is one of the world’s preeminent counterfeiters and has long been suspected of trafficking drugs. While we work to quell the North’s desire to be a nuclear state, we must not simply trade resolving the nuclear issue for another nefarious vice. A re-

pressed, corrupt, and hungry North Korea is not a healthy, stable, and secure North Korea.

The complexities in our bilateral relationship with Iran and North Korea are different. On both accounts, however, we have failed to grasp the correlation between U.S. policy and nationalism and how it leads to support those in power. U.S. saber rattling and threats of regime change have permitted unsavory leaders in each nation to incite nationalist sentiments, leading them to strengthen their grip on power. As Henry Kissinger wrote in his May 16, 2006, *Washington Post* op-ed, "Focusing on regime change as the road to denuclearization confuses the issue." I would go one step further and submit that it hinders our ability to denuclearize either North Korea or Iran. Hostile rhetoric and disengagement will not move us closer to the negotiating table nor a solution.

Dialogue, Even with Foes, Can Be Constructive

Involvement in foreign policy matters is a time-honored role for members of the Senate and one in which I have enjoyed participating during my quarter century in this body. Active involvement in these issues by members of the Senate is not meant to supplant the roles of the president, secretary of state, or their designees. Our foreign policy priorities are set by the executive branch.

Yet, my own experiences in this area, even with leaders such as Arafat or Saddam and on issues such as human rights with China, have convinced me that maintaining a dialogue and allowing cooperation in areas of common interest, even with our most pronounced foes, should be one of our nation's priorities because of its potential to yield positive results. I offer my own experiences, having traveled to 95 different countries, including Syria, Cuba, and Venezuela, as examples of why I believe maintaining an active dialogue and open lines of communication preserve the potential to find peaceful solutions to resolve differences with our adversaries.

My first opportunity to promote dialogue in the face of an international crisis came in the spring of 1982 when serving my first term. Following a Saturday radio address by Reagan, which noted that the Soviet Union and the United States had enough nuclear weapons to destroy the other, I proposed a Senate resolution calling for a summit between the leaders of each nation. Relying on the doctrine of mutually assured destruction was not a sufficient way to provide security for either nation. The obvious solution to this stand-off was to have a negotiated arms control agreement.

Upon calling for a vote on my resolution during consideration of the annual Department of Defense authorization bill, I was sharply challenged by Senator John Tower (Tex.), a fellow Republican and chairman of the Armed

Services Committee. Citing my short tenure, Tower questioned my authority and knowledge on the issue. Senator Paul Laxalt (R-Nev.), one of the first members to vote, supported my resolution. Tower told Laxalt, "Specter's trying to tell the president what to do." He replied, "Well, what's wrong with that? ... Everyone else is too, but Specter's right." Following a lively debate, after which Tower was confident his position would prevail, my resolution was adopted by a vote of 90-8. It did not produce immediate talks between the United States and the Soviet Union, but it showed the support of the Senate for dialogue and may have given a little impetus for the summits during the 1980s.

Syria

I first traveled to the Middle East in 1964. In the intervening 42 years, I have made 24 trips to the region before and after election to the Senate. Since 1984, I have visited Syria 15 times, had nine lengthy meetings with Asad, attended his funeral on the only congressional delegation to Syria in 2000, and met with his son and successor, Bashar al-Asad, on three occasions. I have spent much of my time in the region shuffling between Damascus and Jerusalem, which led me to coin the term "shuffle diplomacy," similar perhaps to Henry Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy," to describe my efforts to bring resolution to issues confronting these neighbors.

In 1988 I urged Asad to permit Syrian Jewish women to emigrate because the limited number of Jewish men in Syria presented them with limited opportunities for marriage. Asad resisted, citing that Syria was "at war" with Israel and that emigration had the potential to strengthen Syria's enemy. I continued to press this issue in subsequent meetings with him. As I reported in an article I wrote for the *New York Post* in 1994, after I continued to press the issue, "Asad responded with a romantic offer that he would allow any Jewish woman to leave when a suitor came to Syria and took her to the United States to marry. That offer was relayed to the active Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn and elsewhere."² Ultimately, Syrian policy was altered to permit Jews to emigrate.

As a result of my many lengthy conversations with Asad, we developed a congenial relationship. In August 1995, I told Asad that when Yitzak Rabin, Shimon Perez, and Arafat received the Nobel peace prize for the Oslo accords, if Asad made peace with Israel, he too would be honored. Asad replied by laughing, saying that he might be well received in Stockholm but probably would not be permitted to return to Damascus. Nevertheless, I continued to urge Syria to participate in discussions with Israel in hopes of alleviating tensions between the two neighbors.

Asad had initially rebuffed offers to open talks with Israel, stating that Syria would only participate in talks sponsored by all five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Israel was opposed to this format, believing that only the

United States would support Israel in such negotiations. When I pressed Asad on this issue again in 1990, he indicated that he had changed his position on the proposal and that Syria would be willing to participate in meetings organized by the United States and the Soviet Union. As I reported in a floor statement, this change was significant because it appeared to be part of a broader Syrian initiative. “In our January 1989 meeting, I asked on three separate occasions, separated by respectable periods of time, what it would take for Syria and Israel to become friends. President Asad answered, after a third query, that it was not a question of friendship, but that ‘normalizing’ a relationship between Syria and Israel might be possible under certain circumstances.”³

I relayed this offer to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, who was “surprised” and “pleased” with Asad’s overture. One year later, in October 1991, Syria participated in the Madrid peace conference cosponsored by Washington and Moscow. Although the three days of talks did not yield a peace agreement, the summit marked the first bilateral talks between Israel and Syria. It is preferable to have the Syrians, Lebanese, Jordanians, Israelis, and Palestinians airing their grievances over coffee at a negotiating table in Spain than through violence in the streets of the Middle East.

Five years later, during my 1996 visit to the region, I served as a line of communication between Jerusalem and Damascus. Prior to my visit, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu indicated that his government would hold Syria accountable for the actions of Hizballah along the Lebanese border. This caused Syria to realign its troops in a posture hostile to Israel, resulting in a dramatic rise in tensions between the two countries. On one side, Syria’s four-million-man army amassed, and on the other side lay Israel’s sophisticated and combat-tested military of 1.5 million.

On August 27, 1996, I met with Netanyahu in Israel. During my report to the Senate, I informed my colleagues that “Mr. Netanyahu said he wanted to begin peace negotiations with his Arab neighbors,” that he “was eager to get to the negotiation table with Syrian President Asad,” and that he “asked me to carry a message to President Asad, whom I was scheduled to meet with the next day.” The following day, I traveled to Damascus and met with Asad for three and a half hours. As I reported in a floor statement, “I conveyed Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu’s message that Israel had only peaceful intentions toward Syria, that both sides should move immediately to reduce military tensions, and that Mr. Netanyahu wanted to reopen direct negotiations between Israel and Syria.”⁴

Focusing on regime change hinders our ability to denuclearize either North Korea or Iran.

Asad did not seem interested in the offer and told me that “Syria would not go back to the table until Prime Minister Netanyahu reaffirms the land-for-peace basis of negotiations, and agrees to pick up where Israel’s Labor Government left off.” Asad further asked me to convey that Syria’s troop movements along the border were routine and not intended to threaten Israel. I returned later that evening to meet with Netanyahu and relayed Asad’s comments that the military action on the border was not to be interpreted by Jerusalem as aggressive.

It is possible to find some areas of common ground, even with our most ardent foes.

Upon my return to the United States, I met Walid al-Moualem, Syrian ambassador to the United States, to get an update on the situation between Syria and Israel from his perspective. As reported in a floor statement at the time, “Ambassador Al-Moualem told me that his government viewed my August round of talks between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President

Asad as having been helpful in deescalating the dangerous tensions ... and the Ambassador encouraged me to return to the region for another round of meetings aimed at helping the parties find a basis to reopen their peace negotiations.”⁵ Moualem later told me that I had “gained the trust and confidence and personal relationship with President Asad” because I was “objective” even though “nobody could question [my] support of Israel.” I later received a similar suggestion from Netanyahu during a phone conversation.

As a result of this encouragement, I returned to the region three months later, in November 1996. During my November 20 meeting with Netanyahu, he informed me “that tensions with Syria [have] been reduced since the August/September time period and that he wants to continue to de-escalate the saber rattling. He asked me to convey this and specifically that Israel has no aggressive intent against Syria.” Netanyahu also told me to tell Asad “that he wishes to [reopen peace talks] as soon as possible and that he is ready, willing, and able to be personally involved in such talks.”

I flew to Damascus after my meeting with Netanyahu to transmit the message to Asad. As reported in a floor statement, “President Asad did generally seem to share Prime Minister Netanyahu’s desire to continue to ease and avoid military tensions which could lead to unintended hostilities. ... Asad received this portion of Prime Minister Netanyahu’s message positively and reiterated his own return message to the same effect.”⁶

Seven years later, on my 2003 trip to the Middle East, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon denounced Syria’s harboring of terrorist organizations and its support for Hizballah in Lebanon. I asked him if he would be willing to enter into peace negotiations with Damascus, brokered by the United States, sim-

ilar to those in which Prime Minister Rabin had participated in the 1990s. He acquiesced with the assurances that there would be no preconditions. I conveyed his response directly to President Bashar al-Asad three days later. Asad responded favorably, saying he was willing to participate in peace talks with Israel. He said he did not think it appropriate to conclude a treaty before Israel and the Palestinian Authority had reached a final settlement but that Syrian-Israeli talks could proceed on a separate track. Although other events in the region have eclipsed this opportunity, I believe we should continue aggressively to advocate peace between these nations so its failure does not become the lead story tomorrow.

Cuba

My experience with Syria provided an opportunity to reduce hostility between a U.S. adversary and one of our allies. My travels have also included three trips to Cuba and meetings with Castro since June 1999, most recently in August 2005. These sessions have given me the opportunity to understand how our nations' confrontational history has been viewed from the perspective of Cuba's leader. They have also proven to me that it is possible to find some areas of common ground, even with our most ardent foes. In time, it is my belief that small cooperative efforts can help to break down the barriers that divide us, leading to expanded cooperation and better relations.

Since the early 1960s, Cuba has been viewed as a Communist stronghold 90 miles off the coast of Florida. The Cuban missile crisis, suspicions of Cuban complicity in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and rumored assassination attempts on Castro by the CIA have complicated our relationship. As a result, U.S. policy has consisted largely of isolating the island nation through comprehensive economic sanctions. During my first meeting with Castro in 1999, we talked about a number of the issues that have divided our countries for so long. I was particularly interested to hear him speak on the assassination of Kennedy because of my work as an assistant counsel on the Warren Commission. As I reported in a floor statement, Castro "maintained that the Cuban government played no role in the assassination, and that it would have been insane for it to have become involved, given that the United States, by his reckoning, was looking for provocation or pretence to invade Cuba. ... President Castro was relieved that the Warren Commission concluded Cuba was not involved with Oswald."⁷

On the Cuban missile crisis, Castro related how President Nikita Khrushchev had mistakenly revealed to him a promise by Kennedy to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey and Italy. As a result, Castro was told, Moscow would breach its agreement with Havana by removing its own missiles from Cuba, leaving the island vulnerable to a U.S. invasion in Castro's view. Castro saw a

bright side to the Soviet withdrawal. As I reported in a floor statement, Castro stated, “We preferred the risk of invasion to the presence of Soviet troops, because it would have established [the] image [of Cuba] as a Soviet base.”⁸

Prior to that first meeting with Castro, I had examined the records of the Church Committee and found that there was evidence of eight or nine attempts by the United States to assassinate him. When presented with

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this number, Castro scoffed and said the actual number was more than 300. When asked how it felt to be the subject of so many attempts on his life, he responded by asking if I had a sport. When I told him I was a squash player, Castro retorted that “avoiding assassination is a sport for me.”

In all of my three meetings with Castro, I pressed him on Cuba’s deprivation of human rights and the failure to have contested elections. I also met with a delegation of human

rights activists, many of whom had been jailed for expressing anti-Castro sentiments. As I reported in a floor statement, “Having just come from a meeting with dissidents, I pressed Castro to release the political prisoners in his jails. Castro tried to shift the topic of conversation from his prisoners by bringing up the case of five Cubans convicted of spying in the U.S. whose convictions were recently overturned.” In reply, I suggested to Castro that “far from being an example of American wrongdoing, this kind of fair process is exactly the type of justice he should be offering to his own people. I also pressed Castro to open his country to democracy and dissent. He listened, but my exhortations obviously had no effect.”⁹ I conveyed to Castro that if the Cuban government initiated some reforms on democratization or freedom of speech, U.S. policymakers would be more favorable to modifying trade policy toward Cuba.

These meetings have left me with the conviction that, before giving consideration to any modification of the U.S. embargo, relations between our two countries can be immediately strengthened in areas such as drug interdiction in the Caribbean and medical research. I proposed to Castro the possibility of U.S.-Cuban cooperation in drug interdiction efforts. Cuba occupies a strategic location for combating the flow of drugs from Latin America to the United States and could be very helpful to U.S. law enforcement efforts. In 1999, Castro said, “[W]e are willing to cooperate”; and as I reported in a floor statement, he “suggested a formal relationship with the United States in order to make progress on drug interdiction in efforts in the area.”¹⁰ In my view, this remains an offer the United States should not only accept but robustly support.

To that end, I have introduced amendments to provide funding for such collaboration in the foreign operations appropriations bills each year since fiscal year 2001. I have been successful in convincing my Senate colleagues to support the provision. Regrettably, the House of Representatives was insistent on dropping the language because of anti-Cuban sentiment among a number of House members, which was supported by the Speaker of the House. Yet, when there were more material issues involved, such as farm trade, Congress was supportive.

Nonetheless, at my insistence, the FY 2002 Foreign Operations Appropriations Conference Report, H.R. 2506, included a provision directing the secretary of state to report on how U.S. counternarcotics assistance to Cuba would decrease the flow of drugs in the region. In July 2002, the State Department reported that, "should Cuba make increased seizures and arrests, it could help impede the drug traffic through the Jamaica-Cuba-Bahamas corridor."

Another area in which closer relations may be mutually beneficial is medical research. Scientists in Cuba have shown promise in developing a meningitis B vaccine. During my visit to Cuba in January 2002, I met with a team of researchers at the Finlay Institute in Havana, which entered into a cooperative agreement with GlaxoSmithKline in 1999 to develop this vaccine.¹¹ Based in part on what I learned from these conversations, I remain convinced that a better relationship with Cuba and the erosion of existing barriers would benefit both countries.

Venezuela

After traveling to Havana last year, I had the opportunity to meet with Chavez on August 17, 2005. It is clear that the United States and Venezuela are at odds over many different issues, but there are areas of interest, such as drug interdiction, where our two countries can work together. These common interests can perhaps serve as a catalyst to construct a dialogue on our differences.

On August 7, 2005, 10 days before I arrived, Chavez suspended cooperation with U.S. counternarcotics officials after accusing U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agents of conducting intelligence operations. Prior to my meeting with Chavez, all efforts by the U.S. ambassador to Venezuela to secure meetings with high-level Venezuelan officials to resolve the dispute had been unsuccessful. After being briefed on the situation by our diplomats in Caracas, I met with Chavez and requested that he direct his ministers to meet with the U.S. ambassador. As I reported in a floor statement, "At the conclusion of our meeting, President Chavez agreed that it would be useful for his Foreign Minister and Minister of Interior to meet with our Ambassador the following week to try to resolve [U.S.-Venezuelan] differences on drug enforcement."¹²

It is clear that isolation has not been successful on many fronts.

After our discussion on narcotics policy, Chavez further suggested that consideration ought to be given to forging a new drug interdiction agreement. Although the State Department's "2006 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report" determined that Venezuela can no longer be certified as an ally in the war on drugs, the report noted that continued U.S. work

with Venezuelan law enforcement led to record cocaine seizures in 2005. The report also states that the United States is committed to renewing cooperation with its Venezuelan counterparts at all levels in the war on drugs in 2006.

During our meeting, Chavez expressed his concern about statements from the United States portraying Venezuela as a destabilizing force in Latin America. Specifically, Chavez mentioned comments made in Peru by Secretary of Defense

Donald Rumsfeld in which the secretary referred to Chavez as "a guy who seemed like a comic figure a year ago [that] is turning into a real strategic menace." I responded by calling on both sides to cease the harsh rhetoric that I believe is counterproductive to enhancing our bilateral relationship. On August 19, 2005, I wrote to Rumsfeld, stating that "I believe there is a window of opportunity at this time to resolve the disagreement on drug interdiction policies" and that "it may well be helpful to, at least, have a moratorium on adverse comments on Venezuela."

Talking Pays

These examples highlight but one senator's efforts to forge a dialogue with foreign leaders. The full weight of the White House and our diplomatic corps can accomplish much more. I encourage the administration to authorize more dialogue with those we consider combative or enemies. The United States will be in a better position when it is engaged in long, hard diplomatic slogs than military conflicts.

It is clear that isolation has not been successful on many fronts. It did not prevent Saddam from repressing his people, it has not crushed the government of Castro, and it certainly does not appear to be working in dealing with Chavez, Ahmadinejad, or Kim. It has been my experience that dialogue, even with pronounced foes, can lead to constructive results. This is particularly true if the conversation starts on areas of common interest and works up to the main areas of disagreement. Such an investment takes time and hard work to see results on our most critical national security interests.

The United States should treat each country and its leaders, no matter how horrific their views, with some form of dignity and respect for their sov-

ereignty. The United States, perhaps more than any other nation in history, has a great capacity to serve as a conduit of peace. It is my hope that we take every opportunity to ensure this capacity is not wasted.

Notes

1. Karim Sadjadpour and Patrick Clawson, "Should the U.S. Negotiate Directly with Iran?" Council on Foreign Relations, May 19, 2006, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/10692>.
2. Arlen Specter, "Senator Reports Assad Is Allowing Exit of Jews," *New York Post*, January 11, 1994.
3. Senator Specter from Pennsylvania, speaking on the January 1990 Trip to Syria and Meeting with President Hafiz al-Asad, on March 6, 1990, 101st Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 136, p. S 2141.
4. Senator Specter from Pennsylvania, speaking on Defense Burdensharing, on September 13, 1996, 104th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 142, p. S 10545.
5. Senator Specter from Pennsylvania, speaking on the November 1996 Trip to the North Atlantic Assembly and the Middle East, on January 22, 1997, 105th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 143, p. S 587.
6. Ibid.
7. Senator Specter from Pennsylvania, speaking on Cuba, on June 24, 1999, 106th Cong, 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 145, p. S 7586.
8. Ibid.
9. Senator Specter from Pennsylvania, speaking on the August 2005 CODEL to Latin America, on September 28, 2005, 109th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 151, p. S 10587 (hereinafter Specter remarks on Latin America 2005 trip).
10. Senator Specter from Pennsylvania, speaking on the Trip to Latin America, on February 27, 2002, 107th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 148, p. S 1242.
11. Ibid.
12. Specter remarks on Latin America 2005 trip, p. S 10588.