

TALK TO IRAN, PRESIDENT BUSH

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The undersigned, a group of former foreign ministers from Europe and North America, find disturbing the reports that the Bush administration may be actively planning to launch military strikes soon against possible nuclear weapons facilities in Iran. Such reports, though denied by the administration, raise alarms nevertheless. Similar reports and similar denials, preceded the administration's decision in 2003 to invade Iraq. We accept Iran's legitimate right to pursue civilian nuclear power with appropriate international safeguards. European leaders have made strenuous efforts to negotiate a solution that met Iran's energy development needs while ensuring respect for non-proliferation norms. Unfortunately, Iran's government continues to resist accepting verifiable constraints on its development of all elements of the nuclear fuel cycle, including large-scale uranium enrichment facilities that could be used to manufacture fuel for nuclear weapons. The threatening and outrageous rhetoric of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has evoked understandable concern in Israel and other countries about Iranian intentions. Israel also has legitimate security concerns about Tehran's growing military capabilities. Although these discussions have proven only partly successful, a unilateral American use of force against Iran would likely have disastrous effects on the International security environment. It is doubtful than a "surgical" air strike could succeed in destroying all of Iran's nuclear assets, while a large-scale invasion and military occupation of the country is widely recognized as unmanageable. Even if American air power succeeded in disrupting for some time Tehran's ability to develop nuclear weapons, Iran could well find others means, including terrorism- to retaliate against Western interests in the region and elsewhere. Such a unilateral use of force by Washington would find little support within Europe and would further undermine trans-Atlantic relations just as they were recovering from divisions created by the invasion of Iraq. Russia and China would certainly oppose such a move. Even close American allies in Asia and Latin America would object to a U.S military action against Iran under present circumstances. Fearing the long-term consequences of an even more radicalized Iranian regime, Turkey, Egypt and other nearby countries would have new grounds to pursue their own nuclear programs, further undermining the global non-proliferation regime. We cannot exclude the fact that the United States might eventually conclude that military action might prove warranted. We are suggesting another course. The potential risks of using force are sufficiently grave that we instead urge the United States to pursue a bold non-military option first. We believe that the Bush administration should pursue a policy it has shunned for many years; attempt to negotiate directly with Iranian leaders about their nuclear program. The administration has already taken the first step in engaging the Iranian government on regional security issues when it authorized its ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalizad, to discuss questions relating to the situation in Iraq with representatives of the Iranian government (hopefully with Iraqis also included). We applaud the administration's decision, but call on it to widen the dialogue and raise it to a higher level, by developing a dialogue on nuclear security issues as well. Some might consider the current Iranian government an unwilling dialogue partner. Yet every European member of our group has met with influential Iranian officials during the past few months and found widespread interest among them in conducting a broad discussion with the United States on security issues. Government leaders in Europe, Russia and Asia also believe that direct talks between Washington and Tehran could prove more fruitful now that the European and Russian-Iranian engagements on Iran's nuclear program have made some progress in communicating mutual positions and concerns. Accordingly, we call on the U.S administration, hopefully with the support of the trans-Atlantic community, to take the bold step of opening a direct dialogue with the Iranian government on the issue of Iran's nuclear program.



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