

Talks With Iran Could Benefit U.S.

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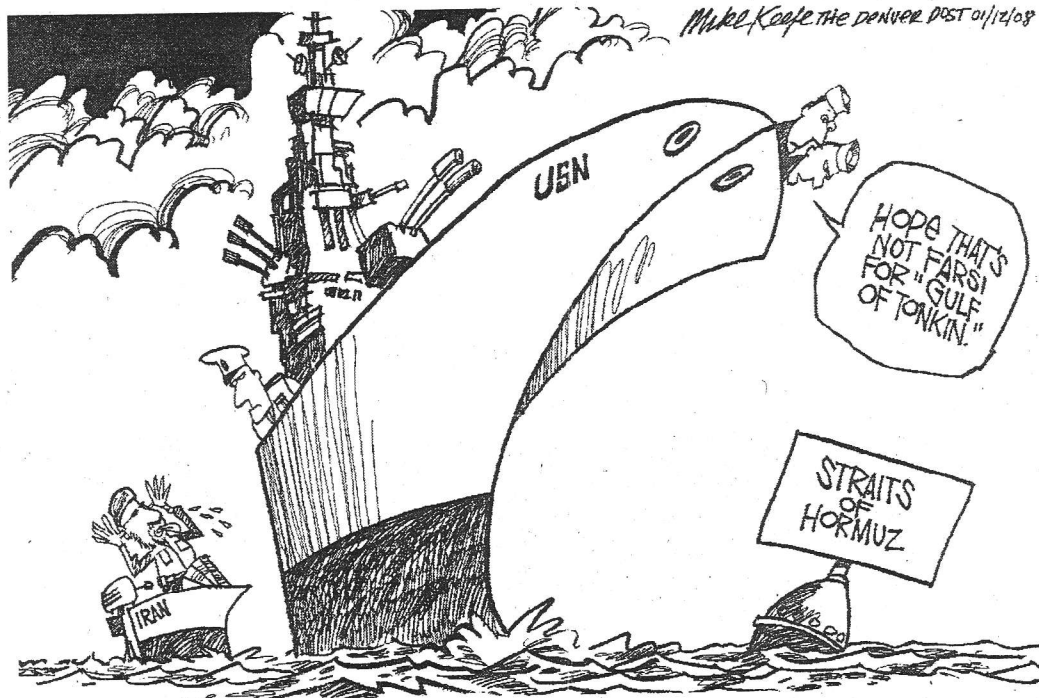
The United States and Iran are caught in a paradigm of hostility that has imprisoned both countries for nearly 30 years. Many Americans, including influential leaders in Washington, seem to assume this hostility will last indefinitely. It does not have to.

Although some portray Iranian leaders as fanatic nihilists with whom no civilized dialogue is possible, the Iranian government has in fact made several overtures to the United States. The most famous came in 2003, when Iran offered to discuss key issues dividing the two countries, including Iran's nuclear program and its support for militant groups like Hamas and Hezbollah. The United States did not reply to that offer.

Since then, the two countries have made tentative steps toward compromise. The Iranian foreign minister recently said he expects to meet, either personally or through representatives, with U.S. officials in Baghdad. He said they would discuss ways of stabilizing Iraq, something that is vital to the security interests of both countries.

This kind of engagement is welcome, but it does not go far enough. The United States could make a great contribution to its long-term security interests, and to the vitally important cause of stability in the Middle East, by offering direct, bilateral and unconditional negotiations with Iran.

It is not productive to insist, as the Bush administration has, that Iran can qualify for negotiations only by ending its "bad behavior." Countries that behave in ways of which we disapprove are precisely the ones with which we need to negotiate most urgently. Bringing them to change their behavior should be a goal of negotiations, not a pre-condition.



Making an unconditional offer to Iran would require a president to conceive of a new kind of relationship with a country that has been militantly anti-American for years. There is an obvious model for this kind of breakthrough. In 1972 President Nixon pulled the United States out of decades of hostility with China. The first document in that process was the Shanghai Communique. It was nothing more than a list of complaints each side had about the other's behavior, and a promise to negotiate them peacefully.

If Iran and the United States were to draw up such a list, American negotiators would certainly want to discuss Iran's nuclear program and its support for radical groups in the Middle East. They might also seek to discuss human rights issues, just as U.S. and Soviet negotiators did when negotiating the historic Helsinki Accords of 1975.

Iran would seek above all security guarantees. Until Iran feels safe, it will not be willing to make important compromises.

Simply offering such talks would send a surge of excite-

ment through Iran's beleaguered democratic movement. It would also signal to Iranians and Muslims around the world that the United States is sincerely interested in countering perceptions of hostility toward Islam.

If successful, these negotiations might produce a new security architecture for the Middle East that would not only change Iran's approach to the outside world, but also calm regional tensions by reducing Israel's fear of an attack from Iran.

It is by no means certain that they would succeed. Not to make the effort, however, would be a historic error. The prospect of a U.S. attack on Iran is still very real. No such attack could be justified unless the United States had made every possible effort to exhaust peaceful alternatives.

Once talks between the United States and Iran were underway, negotiators might quickly realize that these countries are not fated to be enemies forever. Even more tantalizing is the prospect that they might find they have many security interests in common. In fact, there is a stronger base for a long-term

American partnership with Iran than with almost any other Muslim country.

Iran is desperate to stabilize Iraq and Afghanistan, two countries with which it shares borders. Iranian leaders are even more terrified of a fragmented, nuclear-armed Pakistan than are their counterparts in Washington. Iran is a bitter enemy of radical Sunni movements like the Taliban and al-Qaida. Iran is eager to assure the secure flow of Middle Eastern oil to the West. Its oil industry is in a parlous state and needs billions of dollars in investment. American companies have the capital and the know-how to provide it.

All that is required to begin this process is a conceptual breakthrough like the one that President Nixon managed in the 1970s. The American leader who makes it will contribute immeasurably to the cause of peace in the Middle East, and also dramatically strengthen the long-term security of the United States.

Stephen Kinzer is a former New York Times correspondent and author of "All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror."