

An Obama A-Team for Iran

By David Ignatius
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Whom should President Obama appoint as his emissary to Iran, to take on what may be the most important diplomatic mission in decades? The right person (or persons) would have the stature and experience to engage Iran at the highest level -- and to explore what Obama in his inaugural address called "a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect."

My nominees are Zbigniew Brzezinski and Brent Scowcroft, former national security advisers for Presidents Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush, respectively. They would elevate the Iran mission, connecting it to the tradition of bipartisan strategic thinking that shaped America's role in the modern world. And, like our youthful new president, these two octogenarians understand the need for America to "turn a page" in its foreign policy and to connect with what Brzezinski has called a "global political awakening."

I know Brzezinski's and Scowcroft's views about dialogue with Iran because I spent many days with them last spring, moderating a discussion that yielded a book, "America and the World: Conversations on the Future of American Foreign Policy."

The book was an experiment to see whether a prominent Democrat and a prominent Republican could find common ground for new approaches to the world. Indeed they did: On nearly every issue, from the Arab-Israeli dispute to the war in Afghanistan, the two had similar insights about how to use diplomacy better to align America with a changing world.

This willingness to embrace new ideas was especially clear when Brzezinski and Scowcroft talked about Iran. Both believed that the Bush administration's policy of isolating Iran -- and trying to dictate terms for negotiations about its nuclear program -- had been a mistake. Scowcroft argued that the United States had approached Iran "emotionally," while Brzezinski said the administration had followed "a self-defeating policy that simply perpetuates the existing difficulty."

In the book, I asked the two what message they would carry if the next president asked them to serve as joint emissaries to Iran.

Scowcroft replied that his brief to the Iranians would begin this way: "First, that we're aware you live in a dangerous region, and we're prepared to discuss a regional security framework. . . . Second, whether or not you want nuclear weapons, you're proceeding on a course that psychologically destabilizes the whole region. It is dangerous. It will bring about a counterreaction. And let's work on this security framework. You don't need nuclear weapons."

Brzezinski said he agreed and added: "The only way we can accomplish [mutual security] is by sitting together and figuring out some mechanism whereby you achieve what you say you want, which is a peaceful nuclear program, and we achieve what we need, which is a real sense of security that it's not going to go any further."

The two former national security advisers talked hopefully about engaging Tehran. But they are hardly of the gee-whiz school of foreign policy. Brzezinski advocated a military coup in 1978 to check the Muslim revolution; Carter rejected his advice. Scowcroft tilted toward Iraq until Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait; he then became the chief strategist of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Both men start from a realist's appreciation of Iranian power, but both believe that the Iranian challenge is best addressed by diplomacy.

The advantage of sending these two distinguished senior statesmen is that they would make it harder for the Iranians to play political games. Brzezinski and Scowcroft are part of what I call "the great chain of being" of American foreign policy. Their presence as emissaries would signal that engagement with Iran is a matter of the greatest seriousness to the United States, equivalent to their predecessor Henry Kissinger's secret diplomacy with China in 1971. Perhaps most important, the two would have the confidence to walk away from the talks if they made no progress.

One of the few things Brzezinski and Scowcroft disagreed about was whether the initial contacts with Iran should be open (Brzezinski's view) or secret (Scowcroft's preference). Both believe that America's emissaries must meet with an Iranian representative who is close to the supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

I'm biased. I like Brzezinski and Scowcroft, and I don't know anyone who thinks more clearly about foreign policy. If they did become President Obama's emissaries, they should take along someone who could coordinate the dialogue and its aftermath. Dennis Ross, expected to be the State Department's senior adviser on Iran, could play that role.

This one matters, and President Obama would be wise to send the A-team.

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