

Gates: U.S. Should Engage Iran With Incentives, Pressure

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The United States should construct a combination of incentives and pressure to engage [Iran](#), and may have missed earlier opportunities to begin a useful dialogue with Tehran, [Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates](#) said yesterday.

"We need to figure out a way to develop some leverage . . . and then sit down and talk with them," Gates said. "If there is going to be a discussion, then they need something, too. We can't go to a discussion and be completely the demander, with them not feeling that they need anything from us."

In the meantime, Gates told a meeting of the Academy of American Diplomacy, a group of retired diplomats, "my personal view would be we ought to look for ways outside of government to open up the channels and get more of a flow of people back and forth." Noting that "a fair number" of Iranians regularly visit the United States, he said, "We ought to increase the flow the other way . . . of Americans" visiting Iran.

"I think that may be the one opening that creates some space," Gates said.

The Bush administration has said it will talk with Iran, and consider lifting economic and other sanctions, only if Iran ends a uranium enrichment program the administration maintains is intended to produce nuclear weapons, a charge Iran denies. Although the U.S. and Iranian ambassadors to Baghdad met three times last year for discussions on [Iraq](#), Iran has refused to continue that dialogue.

Others, including Sen. [Barack Obama](#) (D-Ill.), who is running for president, have said that talks with Iran on a range of issues might be useful.

Gates publicly favored engagement with Iran before taking his current job in late 2006. In 2004, he co-authored a [Council on Foreign Relations](#) report titled "Iran: Time for a New Approach." At the time, he explained yesterday, "we were looking at a different Iran in many respects" under then-[President Mohammad Khatami](#). Tehran's role in Iraq was "fairly ambivalent," he said. "They were doing some things that were not helpful, but they were also doing some things that were helpful."

"One of the things that I think historians will have to take a look at is whether there was a missed opportunity at that time," Gates said. Khatami was replaced in 2005 by hard-line President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#).

Gates was also a member of the bipartisan 2006 [Iraq Study Group](#), which advocated reaching out to Iran. He resigned from the group when [President Bush](#) nominated him as defense secretary in November that year; the report was published on Dec. 6, the day of his confirmation.

The administration charges that Iran is now deeply engaged in training and arming Shiite militias fighting U.S. troops in Iraq. In his remarks yesterday, Gates said evidence to that effect is "very unambiguous."

But, he said, "I sort of sign up" with [New York Times](#) columnist [Thomas L. Friedman](#), who wrote yesterday that the "right question" for the United States is not whether to talk with Iran but "whether we have leverage or don't have leverage."

"When you have leverage, talk," Friedman advised. "When you don't have leverage, get some -- by creating economic, diplomatic or military incentives and pressures that the other side finds too tempting or frightening to ignore. That is where the Bush team has been so incompetent vis-à-vis Iran."

A number of senior [U.S. military](#) officials have emphasized the need for robust diplomacy toward Iran, while not ruling out the use of force. "I'm a big believer in resolving this diplomatically, economically and politically," [Adm. Michael Mullen](#), chairman of the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#), said in a recent interview with [The Washington Post](#). "The military aspect of this, which I think is a very important part of the equation and must stay on the table," Mullen said, is an option of "last resort."

Gates said yesterday that the U.S. military remained "stretched" by deployments in Iraq and [Afghanistan](#), although he said that all service branches had met their recruitment and retention goals last month. "There is no doubt that . . . we would be very hard-pressed to fight another major conventional war right now," he said. "But where would we sensibly do that, anyway?"

Future conflicts, Gates said, will be asymmetric. "Other countries are not going to come at us in a conventional war."