



**Statement of Senator Joseph R. Biden
Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Hearing on Iran
May 16, 2006**

Mr. Chairman, I commend you for calling this hearing. And I welcome an impressive group of experts. It will not be a surprise that I am very much in agreement with the Chairman's statement.

Unfortunately, the Administration has chosen not to send a senior official to be a part of these hearings. That is a mistake.

If the Administration wants to avoid a repeat of the Iraq fiasco, it must begin to do what it initially failed to do in that arena: level with the American people about what is at stake and what its strategy is. Platitudes like "all options are on the table" and "we're pursuing diplomacy" aren't good enough.

Dodging congressional hearings is not a good start to what promises to be one of the most challenging problems facing our country over the next several years.

Let me state what the potential problem is: a nuclear-armed Iran. That would put the bomb in the hands of a radical theocracy, swimming on a sea of high priced oil, whose president has denied the holocaust, threatened to wipe Israel off the map and to attack us.

In my view, Iran probably would not use a weapon against us or Israel or give the technology to terrorists. But it would feel emboldened to make even more mischief in the region. And if Iran gets the bomb, that could well fuel an arms race with Sunni Arab countries like Egypt and Saudi Arabia, making an already volatile region even more dangerous.

But I believe we have time: most published reports conclude Iran is unlikely to develop a weapon for at least another five years. The critical question is: how do we use that time to persuade Iran to forego nuclear weapons?

For now, the Administration seems to have settled on a diplomatic course. That's the right course -- but it seems to be pursuing it with one hand tied behind its back, and without providing the answers to critical questions that we need to shape a smart policy.

For example, our allies in Europe are working on a package of incentives that are meant to be a final offer to Iran. What is our role in developing these incentives? How seriously can Iran take any offer from Europe -- say on matters related to security guarantees -- if the United States is not part of the deal?

Why are we in a posture of -- in effect -- negotiating with the negotiators? Wouldn't it save some trouble and confusion to be in the room along with our allies as well as Russia and China?

The press reports that if the Iranians spurn the European offer, the US and its allies will move to sanction Iran either through the United Nations Security Council or, failing that, through a coalition of like-minded nations.

What costs will these sanctions entail for Iran, for us, and for key countries we need on our side? How vulnerable is Iran to a ban on imports of gasoline or exports of crude? What would be the impact on oil markets and at the local gas pump if Iranian crude were removed from the market? Why isn't the Administration doing more to prepare the public for the sacrifice sanctions would entail as the Iranian leadership is preparing their public?

More broadly, what are the chances that Europe, Russia, and China will agree to sanctions if they believe the U.S. has not explored every diplomatic avenue, including direct talks with Tehran?

Is the Administration committed to regime change in Iran? Would it be prepared to abandon it as part of a package of security guarantees in a negotiated settlement of the nuclear issue?

Is the Administration's funding of democracy activities inside Iran the best way to promote internal reform, or is that literally the "kiss of death" for Iranian democrats? How do we tap into the deep desire for change, particularly among the majority of the Iranian population which was born after the Islamic Revolution?

I wish we had someone here today from the administration to answer these questions. It is time for a full public airing of the choices before us.

Let me state my recommended policy up front.

Last week, the Iranian President sent a letter to President Bush. The letter won't be nominated for the Nobel Prize for Literature... or for Peace. But the content or style of the letter is not the point, nor is the identity of the sender. I have not been alone in suggesting that we should respond -- not to the letter we received, but with our own ideas on how to move forward.

I would go a step further. We shouldn't respond to President Ahmedinejad. President Bush should write to the man who has the final say in Iran – Ayatollah Khomeini.

I would make the letter public and I would include a call for direct talks with Iran – anywhere, anytime, with everything on the table.

We should be willing to talk about all the issues that divide us: the nuclear program, terrorism, Iraq, Afghanistan, Israeli-Palestinian peace, sanctions, and security.

We should lay out for Iran's leader – and especially for its people – what the future could look like if Iran renounces its nuclear ambitions and support for terrorism – and what the future could look like if it does not.

Would Iran respond favorably? I don't know, but in recent months, Iran has indicated a readiness to engage.

Indeed, an Iranian outline for a grand bargain was communicated to the Bush Administration three years ago. While the government in Tehran has changed since then, Iran's fundamental positions likely have not. If anything the regime is now more comfortable with the reformists purged from the *Majlis* and the presidency.

Four years ago, when I was chairman of this committee, I called publicly for a dialogue between members of Congress and the Iranian *Majlis*. Senator Hagel joined me in that effort. That call – from two senators – sparked an intense debate in Iran that lasted several weeks. The reformist press embraced it. The hard-liners condemned it. The government couldn't figure out how to respond.

If two senators can spark that kind of debate, imagine what the President could do.

I believe that an offer of direct dialogue would place enormous pressure on the Iranian leadership -- from their own people and from the international community. Iranian leaders would face a stark choice – reject the overture and risk complete isolation and an angry public, or accept it and start down a path that would require Iran to alter its nuclear ambitions.

Talking to Tehran would not reward bad behavior or legitimize the regime. Talking is something we have done with virtually every other country on earth, including the former Soviet Union -- which posed an existential threat to us – and unsavory regimes like the ones in North Korea and Libya.

Demonstrating that we made a serious attempt at diplomacy is also the best way to keep others on board for tougher actions if Iran fails to respond.

It would be a wise course of action for any administration. But for this Administration, with its blemished record in Iraq, it is not simply a wise choice – it is a requirement. The threshold of trust is much higher. If the Administration wants to convince our allies and others to place serious pressure on Iran, it must walk the extra diplomatic mile.

I hope that we can proceed with the wisdom that this moment requires. How the Iran crisis is handled will help determine international security for a generation, if not longer.

I look forward to the testimony.