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Congress vs. Obama on Iran

By Stephen Zunes
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Hardliners in Tehran are not happy with the recent rapprochement between the United States and Iran and the related progress in negotiations to address Western concerns about the Iranian nuclear program. But the bigger threat may come from hardliners in the Washington, including prominent congressional Democrats.

As the first step in a de-escalation deal whose details have yet to be worked out, Iran would agree to strict safeguards to prevent the enrichment of uranium to a degree that could be used for the development of nuclear weapons. In return, the United States would agree to a partial lifting of economic sanctions. Further lessening of sanctions would be dependent on further Iranian concessions.

A bipartisan coalition on Capitol Hill, however, opposes even this modest first step. The group is pushing legislation that would make such an interim agreement impossible.

Responding to Reform in Iran

The election of moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani as Iran's new president this summer sent a clear message that the Iranian people wanted to end the country's isolation and improve relations with the United States by negotiating a mutually agreeable settlement. A senior administration official who has been at the center of the talks for more than two years noted how he had "never had such intense, detailed, straightforward, candid conversations with the Iranian delegation before,"

adding, “I would say we really are beginning that type of negotiation where one could imagine that you could possibly have an agreement.”

Unfortunately, rather than respond positively to Rouhani’s election, the U.S. House of Representatives—just two days before his inauguration in August—voted by an overwhelming 400-20 margin to impose punitive new sanctions on Iran. The measures targets Iran’s foreign reserves and attempts to end all Iranian oil sales by 2015, with the goal of plunging the country into a debilitating economic depression. It was a bipartisan rejection of the new president’s offer to enhance nuclear transparency and pursue “peace and reconciliation” with the West.

A large group of U.S. experts on Iran and former officials—as well as Rep. Jim McDermott (D-WA) and 15 other members of Congress—urged leaders in the House of Representatives to delay the vote until after Rouhani was inaugurated and had a chance to lead the nuclear negotiations. As Rep. Keith Ellison (D-MN) noted, “Why aren’t we at least curious to find out whether or not President Rouhani means that he wants to pursue this course of peace?” Yet House Democratic leaders Nancy Pelosi and Steny Hoyer joined Republican leaders in pushing through the punitive sanctions bill despite the risks of sabotaging talks that could offer the best chance to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

That same day, a bipartisan group of 76 senators—more than three-quarters of the upper chamber—in an apparent effort to poison the atmosphere on the eve of Rouhani’s inauguration, signed a letter to President Obama demanding “the maintenance and toughening of sanctions” and “a convincing threat of the use of force.”

Senate Pushback

The Obama administration has been trying to prevent the Senate from taking up the bill. Particularly in light of the positive developments of recent weeks, the administration doesn’t want to alienate U.S. allies and disrupt hopes for a diplomatic solution. Wendy Sherman, the lead U.S. negotiator in the talks with Iran, called for a delay in imposing any new sanctions on Iran to see how the talks progress, saying, “We think that this is a time for a pause, to see if these negotiations can gain traction.”

However, in the lead-up to the next round of Geneva talks, a bipartisan group of 10 influential senators—including Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Robert Menendez (D-NJ)—signed a letter calling for a harder line on sanctions. Menendez and his hawkish colleagues have expressed a willingness to delay passing the increased sanctions that passed the House, but only if Iran fully suspends its nuclear reprocessing, which is an unrealistic demand at this stage. Nuclear enrichment and reprocessing for civilian nuclear energy is permitted under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, but these senators insist that an exception be made for Iran. By contrast, the Obama administration appears willing to allow limited Iranian nuclear enrichment, though with strict guarantees that the enrichment level would be low enough so that it could only be used for civilian purposes and not to develop nuclear weapons, a proposal that Sen. Mark Kirk (R-IL) insists constitutes “appeasement.”

The Obama administration has expressed concerns that Iran's civilian nuclear program is advancing in such a way that it could eventually be weaponized. However, based on a consensus of U.S. intelligence agencies, the administration acknowledges that there is no evidence that Iran currently has a nuclear weapons program. Despite this, the letter by the Menendez and the others claims that Iran already has a "nuclear weapons program." Furthermore, this bipartisan group—which also includes Kelly Ayotte (R-NH), Roy Blunt (R-MO), Robert Casey (D-PA), Christopher Coons (D-DE), Lindsey Graham (R-SC), John McCain (R-AZ), Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), Patty Murray (D-WA), and Charles Schumer (D-NY)—insists that only after completely dismantling this non-existent program will they "be prepared to remove existing sanctions in a measured, sequenced manner." Until then, the letter states, "we reaffirm that a credible military threat remains on the table and we underscore the imperative that the current sanctions be maintained aggressively."

Noting that there are other issues with Iran, such as the regime's political repression and denial of civil liberties to Iranians, the Senate hardliners insist that sanctions must remain in place even if the nuclear issues is resolved. Even putting aside the obvious double-standards—such as their support for allied Middle Eastern governments with similarly poor human rights records—a refusal to consider lessening sanctions in return for a nuclear agreement is clearly a non-starter. In other words, they—like their counterparts in the House—appear to want the talks to fail.

Other members of Congress are weighing in against the president's initiative as well. Sen. Ed Markey (D-MA)—who, ironically, came to office in a special election earlier this year with the support of Peace Action and other progressive groups—insists that the United States "should not relax the sanctions one inch while Iran's intentions are still unknown." Similarly, Daniel Harsha, a spokesperson for Democrats on the House Foreign Affairs Committee stated, "Tehran must know that Congress will not acquiesce to lifting sanctions until they completely and verifiably dismantle their nuclear program." Rep. Steve Israel (D-NY) observed, "If the president were to ask for a lifting of existing sanctions, it would be extremely difficult in the House and Senate to support that."

These Democratic hawks are quite influential with their colleagues: Sen. Murray and Rep. Israel, for example, respectively chair the Senate and House Democratic campaign committees.

Sanctions or War?

Giandomenico Picco, a former assistant UN secretary general for political affairs, noted how these congressional proponents of further sanctions are "going to complicate the negotiation process significantly" and bolster hardliners in Iran suspicious of American intentions. Similarly, Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, notes that although ending all enrichment would be ideal, it is "clearly a non-starter" if the goal is to prevent nuclear proliferation. "If the P5+1 were to insist upon zero enrichment and the dismantling of its core facilities, it's more than likely that the Iranians will simply just walk away."

Anyone who has studied conflict resolution recognizes that, in order to get the other party to do what you want them to do, there must be incentives as well as punishment. Imposing harsh sanctions without the hope of partial relief short of capitulation is completely unrealistic,

especially against a country with a strong a sense of nationalism and a history of humiliation by the West. There must be ways for both sides to declare victory. This is what a majority of congressional Democrats as well as Republicans is trying to prevent.

Unfortunately, the alternative to a successful negotiated settlement appears to be war. Some Republicans, at least, are being honest about it: Congressman Trent Franks (AZ) and Sen. Lindsay Graham—declaring that the time for talking with Iran is over—have introduced a resolution authorizing the use of military force. According to the resolution, even the complete elimination of Iran’s nuclear program would not be enough to avoid war, since the resolution includes a number of unrelated demands, including Iranian recognition of Israel. Some Republicans want to go even further. For example, Sheldon Adelson, chair of the Republican Jewish Coalition, recently called for a U.S. nuclear strike on Iran.

As *Foreign Policy* magazine noted, “Opposition from Democratic lawmakers represents more than just a political headache for the administration. Congress has the power to impose, modify or remove sanctions regardless of what the White House wants, and it has shown a willingness to overrule the administration in the past.”

Unless the American public holds both Republican and Democratic legislators accountable, they will succeed in doing just that. And the likely consequence, sooner or later, could be a disastrous war.