
US must be 'more forthcoming' to Iran

By Jim Lobe

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WASHINGTON - With the inauguration of Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani, the United States should take a more flexible approach toward Tehran to increase the chances of a successful resolution of the latter's nuclear program, according to a report by the Brussels-based International Crisis Group (ICG) released on Tuesday.

The report, "Great Expectations: Iran's New President and the Nuclear Talks", urges the administration of President Barack Obama to take a series of measures to enhance the prospects for progress in a likely new round of negotiations between Iran and the so-called P5+1 (the US, Britain, France, China and Russia plus Germany) next month.

Specifically, the report called for Washington to engage in direct bilateral talks with Iran alongside the P5+1 and to be more forthcoming in the negotiations - by offering greater sanctions relief in exchange for Iranian concessions and describing an "end-state" that would include de facto recognition of Tehran's "right" to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes.

It should also widen the scope of discussions between the West and Iran to include regional security issues, according to the report, which called on Washington to end its opposition to Tehran's participation in any future international conference on Syria.

Finally, the report stressed that imposing new economic sanctions against Iran at such a delicate time is likely to prove counter-productive.

"Now is not the time to ramp up sanctions," the report stated. "That could well backfire, playing into the hands of those in Tehran wishing to prove that Iran's policies have no impact on the West's attitude, and thus that a more flexible position is both unwarranted and unwise."

It also noted that "heightened sanctions", such as those recently approved by a 400-20 vote in the Republican-led US House of Representatives, "could undermine Rouhani's domestic position even before he has a chance to test his approach".

The report comes amidst considerable speculation in Washington as to whether Rouhani, who was inaugurated just last week after pulling off a surprise first-round victory in June elections, will prove more flexible than his predecessor, Mahmud Ahmadinejad, in nuclear negotiations and, critically, can persuade Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to back him up in Iran's highly factionalized political environment.

While most US officials, including Obama, have indicated "cautious optimism" that they can do business with Rouhani, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu denounced him as "a wolf in sheep's clothing" even before his inauguration.

The latter theme has been echoed repeatedly since Rouhani's election by lawmakers and think tanks closely associated with the Israel lobby and its most prominent flagship, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). The latter has also urged the US Congress to quickly approve tougher sanctions - as early as next month even before the next P5+1

meeting - to increase pressure on Tehran to suspend, if not abandon its nuclear program.

"American resolve is critical, especially in the next few months," wrote Republican Senator Mark Kirk and Democratic Representative Eliot Engel in a Wall Street Journal op-ed published Tuesday. "By bringing the regime to the verge of economic collapse, the US can [force] Iran to comply with all international obligations, including suspending all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities."

The two men, both of whom enjoy especially close relations with AIPAC, urged the senate to swiftly approve the sanctions bill passed last month by the House.

Among other measures, it would impose sanctions against any foreign country or company that buys Iran's oil or that conducts business with key sectors of Iran's economy, such as its auto and petrochemical industries. It would also cut off access to most of Iran's overseas financial reserves and reduce or eliminate the president's authority to waive such sanctions.

Whether the Democrat-led senate will do so remains unclear. The administration has indicated that it opposes new sanctions pending a new round of negotiations, but it is uncertain whether it can keep key Democrats in line in the face of a major AIPAC campaign when congress returns from its August recess in the first days of September.

Seventy-six of the 100 senators signed an AIPAC-inspired letter to Obama initiated by the Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Robert Menendez, which called for enhanced sanctions and "a convincing threat of the use of force that Iran will believe", although it did not explicitly endorse the House bill, and some key senators who normally go along with AIPAC's initiatives apparently declined to sign it.

In a rare departure from his usual staunchly pro-Israel stance, the number two Democrat in the House, Steny Hoyer, told officials in Israel this week that Rouhani should be given an opportunity to be heard, according to a report by the Jewish Telegraph Agency on Tuesday.

Hoyer, who is leading a delegation of 36 Democratic lawmakers, was not one of 131 House members, including 18 Republicans, who signed a letter last month calling for enhanced diplomatic engagement with Iran to resolve the nuclear issue.

The ICG report stressed that expectations of significant progress in negotiations on the nuclear file should be restrained and that "Iran's bottom line demands - recognition of its right to enrich and meaningful sanctions relief - will not budge" due not only to Khamenei's retention of the "final say" on the issue, but also because of Rouhani's long-standing involvement and investment in the nuclear program.

Indeed, his failure in the early 2000s, when he served as Iran's top nuclear negotiator, to obtain anything in return for an agreement with the EU-3 (Britain, France, and Germany) to suspend enrichment for a year and a half will likely make him "highly reluctant to take any step that is tantamount to suspending enrichment.

"Instead, he will likely be far more inclined to focus on measures to increase transparency of the nuclear program," according to the report.

It added that whether greater transparency by itself will satisfy Washington and its allies is "highly questionable" as Tehran draws closer

to the capability to build a bomb within a matter of weeks if it chooses to do so, thus becoming a "virtual nuclear weapons state".

Moreover, "Western doubts about Rouhani's ability to deliver are matched by Tehran's skepticism that the US in particular can accept a modus vivendi with the Islamic Republic or that President Barack Obama has the political muscle to lift sanctions," the report said.

That said, Rouhani, whose election was made possible by a coalition of moderate and reformist leaders, has made clear that he believes Iran's recent strategy in dealing with the issue has come at an exorbitant cost to the Iranian economy. Moreover, his unexpected victory "gives him a relatively potent mandate for change".

To facilitate such a change, Washington and its Western allies should not maintain their "wait-and-see posture" but instead put "more ambitious proposals on the table", such as offering greater sanctions relief for a period of time in exchange for Iran's suspension of its 20-percent enrichment of its uranium and conversion of its existing to fuel rods and a freeze on the installation of advanced centrifuges in its bunkered enrichment facility at Fordow.

Launching bilateral talks with Tehran - something Obama has repeatedly proposed - would also enhance the chances for progress, according to the report, which noted that Rouhani has several times since his election indicated his support for such a dialogue despite Khamenei's frequently voiced skepticism that it would bear fruit.

* Jim Lobe's blog on US foreign policy can be read at <http://www.lobelog.com>.

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