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Bipartisan coalition seeks to undermine rapprochement with Iran

by Stephen Zunes

Perspective

While legitimate concerns have been raised about hardliners in Tehran undermining the recent rapprochement between the United States and Iran, the bigger threat may come from hardliners in Washington, including prominent congressional Democrats.

Though the details are still a long way from being worked out, it appears that a first step being considered that could de-escalate the crisis and lessen the risk of war would be for Iran to agree to strict safeguards to assure that they will not enrich 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, is opposing even this modest first step, pushing legislation that would make such an interim agreement impossible.

The election of moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani as Iran's new president this summer sent a clear message that the Iranian people were interested in ending the country's isolation and improving relations with the United States. 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 measure would target Iran's foreign reserves and attempt to end all

Iranian oil sales by 2015, with the goal of plunging the country into a debilitating economic depression. This was widely interpreted as a bipartisan rejection of Rouhani's offer to enhance nuclear transparency and pursue "peace and reconciliation" with the West.

The Obama administration has been trying to prevent the Senate from taking up the bill, noting it could 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 and giving time 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."

Sen. Mark Kirk, an Illinois Republican, however, says to do so would constitute "appeasement."

While expressing concerns that Iran's civilian nuclear program could eventually be shifted to a weaponized program, the Obama administration, based on a consensus of U.S. intelligence agencies, acknowledges that there is no evidence that Iran currently has a nuclear weapons program. Despite this, a letter by Senate Foreign Relations Chairman Robert Menendez, D-N.J., and nine others claims that Iran already has a "nuclear weapons program."

This bipartisan group also consists of Republicans Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire, Roy Blunt of Missouri, Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and John McCain of Arizona, and Democrats Bob Casey of Pennsylvania, Christopher Coons of Delaware, Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, Patty Murray of Washington and Charles Schumer of New York. They say that only after completely dismantling this nonexistent 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, they insist that sanctions must remain in place even if the nuclear issue 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 nonstarter. In other words, like their counterparts in the House, they appear to want the talks to fail.

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 sense of nationalism and a history of humiliation from the West. There must be ways for both sides to declare victory. This is what a majority in both parties is trying to prevent.

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Unfortunately, the alternative to a successful negotiated settlement appears to be war. Some Republicans, at least, are being honest about it: Rep. Trent Franks of Arizona has introduced a bill that would authorize the use of military force. Graham has been talking about similar legislation in the Senate. According to Franks' bill, even the complete elimination of Iran's nuclear program would not be enough to avoid war, because the bill includes a number of unrelated demands, including Iranian recognition of Israel. Some Republicans want to go even further. For example, Sheldon Adelson, chairman 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 the Republican and Democratic legislators accountable, Congress will succeed in doing just that. And the likely consequences, sooner or later, could be a disastrous war.

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