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US President Barack Obama delivers his State of the Union speech in Capitol Hill, Washington, January 7, 2014. (Photo by: REUTERS)

I will veto' new legislation against Iran, Obama tells Congress

By Michael Wilner
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In fifth State of the Union to Congress and the nation, Obama says Iran diplomacy "may not succeed," issues veto threat against new sanctions bill.



WASHINGTON – US President Barack Obama entered Congress on Tuesday night and defended his diplomatic strategy with Iran, threatening to veto [legislation introduced in the Senate last month](#) that could torpedo international negotiations over its nuclear program.

“Let me be clear,” Obama said in his State of the Union address, “if this Congress sends me a new sanctions bill now that threatens to derail these talks, I will veto it.”

The speech marked the first time Obama personally threatened to veto sanctions legislation against Iran. Senior White House aides have issued similar veto threats since the end of December, when Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Robert Menendez, a Democrat, introduced the [Nuclear Weapon Free Iran Act of 2013](#).



The bill – which would trigger new sanctions tools against Iran should negotiations fail to reach a comprehensive agreement in 12 months' time – has since [garnered 59 public cosponsors](#) in the upper chamber across party lines. The bill also has the aggressive backing of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the largest pro-Israel lobby in Washington.

“For the sake of our national security,” Obama said in his speech, “we must give diplomacy a chance to succeed.”

The president noted that negotiations toward a treaty over Iran’s nuclear program, now a decade old, would be difficult and “may not succeed.” In prior remarks, Obama has put the odds of success in negotiations with Iran at less than 50 percent.

“If Iran’s leaders do not seize this opportunity, then I will be the first to call for more sanctions, and stand ready to exercise all options to make sure Iran does not build a nuclear weapon,” Obama continued. “But if Iran’s leaders do seize the chance, then Iran could take an important step to rejoin the community of nations, and we will have resolved one of the leading security challenges of our time without the risks of war.”

Responding to the president’s charge, Sen. Mark Kirk (R-Illinois), who coauthored the hanging sanctions bill, said that nevertheless “the Senate should act” on the bill.

“The American people – Democrats and Republicans alike – overwhelmingly want Iran held accountable during any negotiations,” Kirk said in a statement.

Polls show that while most Americans don’t prioritize foreign policy matters, they view Iran with deep distrust, and support more sanctions over less.

“While the president promises to veto any new Iran sanctions legislation, the Iranians have already vetoed any dismantlement of their nuclear infrastructure,” Kirk added, calling his bill an “insurance policy” for Congress.

“I don’t think its a good idea to pass sanctions while we’re in the midst of negotiations,” Sen. Rand Paul (R-Kentucky), said on CNN after the speech. Paul, a libertarian, is a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

James Jeffrey, a former senior American diplomat and an expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said that the president was “careful not to oversell the Iran negotiations” in his

Tuesday address, outlining the interim deal in factual terms and underlining the delicacy of the talks.

“Linked with his strong affirmation to Israel’s security, the president stayed within the bounds of the national consensus on this most important of diplomatic initiatives,” Jeffrey said. “His repeated stress on ending America’s wars, however, left still unclear how enthusiastic he would be about using all options, including force, against a recalcitrant Iran.”

The president also made brief note of Secretary of State John Kerry’s efforts to forge peace between Israel and the Palestinians to “end the conflict there; to achieve dignity and an independent state for Palestinians, and lasting peace and security for the State of Israel.”

He referred to Israel as the “Jewish state,” in a subtle but notable reference to Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s condition in peace talks to have a future Palestinian state recognize Israel as the Jewish homeland.

Delivering his fifth State of the Union address to Congress and the nation – the speech is the largest televised address given by an American president every year – Obama’s remarks echoed speeches from years past, utilizing similar language on Iran as he has used throughout his presidency.

“The international community is more united and the Islamic Republic of Iran is more isolated,” Obama said in his State of the Union address in 2010.

“And as Iran’s leaders continue to ignore their obligations, there should be no doubt: They, too, will face growing consequences. That is a promise.”

Over the past 10 years, Iran has grown its nuclear program with virtually no effective impediment, and is now in possession of enough enriched uranium to produce five to six nuclear warheads within months should it choose to proceed.

In 2003, Iran had 163 operating centrifuges to enrich uranium; it now has over 20,000, some four to five times more efficient than their older models, as well as the infrastructure for a heavy-water plutonium plant that provides them with a second path to the bomb.

Countries allied against the program, citing national security and strategic interests, have sought to sanction Iran’s leaders and its key industries, both as punishment for its past actions and as negative reinforcement, hoping that the specter of economic collapse will force Iran’s leaders to capitulate.

Congress and the president passed a particularly harsh package of financial penalties in 2011, when the president, in that year’s State of the Union address, said that “because of a diplomatic effort to insist that Iran meet its obligations, the Iranian government now faces tougher and tighter sanctions than ever before.”

Iranian crude oil exports dropped by more than 60% after new sanctions took effect in January 2012, and a June 2013 presidential poll in Iran resulted in the election of Hassan Rouhani, who campaigned on improving relations with the West for sanctions relief.

He has since opened diplomatic corridors with the US and its allies.

“The leaders of Iran must recognize that now is the time for a diplomatic solution, because a coalition stands united in demanding that they meet their obligations, and we will do what is necessary to prevent them from getting a nuclear weapon,” Obama said in his 2013 address.

After months of negotiating in secret, and two months of public talks in Geneva, an interim deal was reached between Iran and world powers that gives the parties six months to negotiate and six months more should all parties agree that an extension would be fruitful.

The agreement, reached in November between the Islamic Republic and the P5+1 – the US, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China and Germany – temporarily freezes Iran’s enrichment of uranium above 5% concentration, and its production of a heavy-water plutonium plant in Arak, for \$6 billion-\$7b. in sanctions relief doled out in increments over the next six months.

“It is American diplomacy, backed by pressure, that has halted the progress of Iran’s nuclear program – and rolled parts of that program back – for the very first time in a decade,” Obama said on Tuesday night. “As we gather here tonight, Iran has begun to eliminate its stockpile of higher levels of enriched uranium. It is not installing advanced centrifuges. Unprecedented inspections help the world verify, every day, that Iran is not building a bomb.”

“If John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan could negotiate with the Soviet Union,” Obama added, “then surely a strong and confident America can negotiate with less powerful adversaries today.”



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