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Interview With CNN Moscow Correspondent Matthew Chance

R. Nicholas Burns , Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs

U.S. Embassy Moscow

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Matthew Chance, CNN: The issue of Iran. The negotiations with Russia don't seem to have come to very much at this stage. Obviously the negotiations with the European three have come to nothing as well. Has the time come to get tough with Iran?

Ambassador Burns: Well the time has come to have a final IAEA Board of Governor's meeting on March 6th and 7th, and then if Iran cannot meet the requirements already set down by the IAEA, and that you know was a very strong vote, it was more members of the non-aligned movement voting for than against; it was China, Russia, India, Brazil, of course the U.S., Europe and most of Asia. If Iran cannot listen to what the IAEA has suggested then there is no question that the action is going to be shifted to the Security Council in New York, and the Security Council is going to have to shine a bright light on Iran, and have to ask lots of questions, and ask the Iranians to report back to the international community on why they seem to be unwilling to meet these conditions, and why they are so insistent on seeking their rights in developing nuclear power, but not adhering to their responsibilities? That's the basic problem that the Iranians have now: a lack of trust.

Matthew Chance: How much mileage do you think there is left in this compromise Russian proposal that's on the table. Mohammed ElBaradei, the Secretary General of the IAEA, suggested that the international community may have to accept limited Iranian enrichment activities in Iran. Is that something the United States could ever accept?

Ambassador Burns: I think the great majority of countries could not accept any kind of enrichment related activities pertaining to Iran. If you look very carefully at the IAEA resolutions, both the one from February 2nd and the previous one in September, they are very specific: Iran is not to engage in enrichment activities of any kind whatsoever, whether its limited centrifuge research, which they are engaged in right now at their plant in Natanz, or anything else. And so I think we're going to have to strike a very hard bargain here. The international community painted a bright red line before enrichment activities. Iran crossed that line. It then essentially cast aside not only the negotiations with the EU-3, but also supervision by the IAEA, so were going to have to insist that Iran meet this international standard.



Matthew Chance: So, just to be clear, allowing Iran even uranium enrichment activities for research purposes is not something Washington would consider?

Ambassador Burns: It's hard to distinguish between research and then scientific and technological knowledge. What is Iran is trying to do is master the nuclear fuel cycle. That could give the Iranians, in the future, the ability to produce fissile material, because of the enrichment process and reprocessing process, and thus the essential ingredient in a nuclear device. We can not allow Iran to achieve that capability, and that's why countries as diverse as Egypt and Sri Lanka and India and the United States spoke with one voice a couple of weeks ago to say no enrichment activities of whatever kind, and frankly that's what we are hearing from our closest allies in Europe as well as many of the other large countries that have made their views clear on this issue. **Matthew Chance:** As you mentioned we are approaching the time when the United Nations Security Council may be expected to consider what action, if any, to take against Iran. What will you be advising, what do you think the United Nations Security Council should do?

Ambassador Burns: Well the Security Council will follow of course the meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency Board of Governors. There is a chance for Iran of course to try to win back the good graces of the international community, and that would be for Iran to step back from all of its nuclear fuel cycle activities, to suspend them, and then to re-engage in negotiations. The Russian government has offered a perfectly reasonable proposal. But that proposal has to do with nuclear fuel supply from offshore, no activities on the soil of Iran whatsoever, and that is what Iran is insisting on. So I think if Iran cannot meet these conditions, then of course the Security Council will have to take up the issue. The issue technically is already there. We will support the process of gradual steps designed to convince the Iranian government that it has got to listen to the international community, and that it has got to adhere to the guidelines that everyone else has to adhere to.

Matthew Chance: Obviously the options on the table range from the military option, is that still being considered?

Ambassador Burns: Well Secretary of State Rice said last week when she testified before Congress that we would be looking for a process whereby the Security Council might entertain a Presidential Statement, or a Chapter 7 resolution of the Security Council, and if after all those steps were taken Iran had not acceded to the wishes of the international community, then of course we would have to look at measures for instance concerning sanctions. A number of countries are beginning to look at that right now. We are not there yet. That's in the future. We would hope that as Iran looks at this international scenario they would understand one thing: Iran is isolated. They clearly miscalculated the strength of will on the part of the international community. I think their strategy in 2005 first was to divide the EU countries from the United States, that didn't work. Then they tried to divide Europe and America on the one hand from Russia and China, and that didn't work. When the foreign ministers from the permanent five countries agreed three weeks ago in London that they would vote together to censure Iran at the IAEA and that we would move the issue to the Security Council, that was a very powerful signal to the Iranians that they are indeed isolated in the world.

Matthew Chance: When we talk about sanctions, when we talk about economic sanctions, which are perhaps the only kind of sanctions that the Iranian regime may listen to, how confident are you that countries like Russia, countries like China, which have very strong commercial interests in Iran, would be willing to back economic sanctions on a country on which they depend a great deal on for money?

Ambassador Burns: I wouldn't pretend to speak on behalf of those governments. I wouldn't want to say to you what I

think they might do, except to say this: We clearly are giving diplomacy a chance here. We spent the entire last year supporting the European proposals, and the Russians put a very good proposal on the table in mid-October. The United States and Europe supported that and still support that. The Iranians have been given every opportunity to negotiate, but they walked away from negotiations unilaterally, and thus they now need to face the Security Council and the world community. I think that we'll start in a way to give the Iranians a chance to explain themselves, but also to pull back from what they've been doing. And if they can't do that then I do think that a number of countries, including my own, will have to consider additional targeted sanctions.

Matthew Chance: Now the United States has backed the European Union efforts to negotiate with Iran. It's backed the Russian proposal as well. But as this is an issue that is so crucial to U.S. foreign policy in the region, shouldn't the United States be leading the negotiations itself, engaging in negotiations with Iran in some way?

Ambassador Burns: You know we've done everything asked of us. You have to appreciate our position. We have not had diplomatic relations now going on for 27 years with the government of Iran. We have a lot of historical grievances against that government: acts of terrorism against our civilians, against our military, and of course the sacking of our Embassy in 1979-80. We haven't forgotten that. But we did what was asked of us. Secretary Rice announced last March that we would support the European negotiating effort. We faithfully supported that. We have now since engaged in a very assertive round of diplomacy to convince Russia, China, India, Brazil to join this larger coalition of countries. I think that is a considerable achievement on the part of Europe and the United States working together. And there is really nothing for us to say to the Iranians. This is a government that is the leading sponsor of terrorism and of Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hamas in the Middle East. It is a country that has been injurious to our interests in Iraq, and it's a government that is now is, we think, trying to achieve a nuclear weapons capability. So we are quite comfortable with where we are. We know what our principles are. We have drawn our red lines, we the United States along with the international community. And I think that diplomacy is the best way to pursue these grievances that all of us have against the Iranian government.

Matthew Chance: Do you think there is a sense in which Washington's policy towards Iran may be exacerbating the matter? For example, look at it from Iran's point of view. They are surrounded on three sides by U.S. troops: to the west in Iraq, to the east in Afghanistan, to the north in Central Asia. Washington consistently talks about the need for regime change in Iran. And America doesn't provide the country with any security guarantees.

Ambassador Burns: The onus of responsibility here rests with the Iranian government. They are the ones who withheld information from the IAEA for 18 years about their secret nuclear research. They are the ones that have now crossed these international red lines, first with uranium conversion in October, and then with uranium enrichment just in the last several weeks, and then walking out of the international talks with the Europeans. These are not actions taken by the United States. They are the actions of the government of Iran. They are the ones who chose as a hallmark of their foreign policy to become the leading state-sponsor of terrorism in the Middle East. So they have to accept responsibility for their actions. The United States is a force for stability in Afghanistan and in Iraq. We would hope that Iran would seek to alter its foreign policy, to itself become a country interested in stability and not revolutionary terrorism.

Matthew Chance: Do you think it would be helpful if the United States did offer security guarantees to Iran? It may encourage Iran perhaps to suspend its uranium enrichment activities, to being more confident.

Ambassador Burns: I don't think there is any reason to why that would work. The Iranians have pursued a radical

foreign policy since President Ahmadinejad took power in August. They not only have pursued their nuclear ambitions and support for terrorism, they have a much more muscular, and some would say aggressive foreign policy toward their own neighbors in the Middle East. This is not the time for the United States to be quieting Iran with security assurances that they don't deserve to have. This is the time to pursue a diplomatic solution, and to have a broad international coalition that we have assembled pursue these grievances both at the IAEA, and more importantly now as we look to the month of March, at the Security Council.

Matthew Chance: If we can just talk very briefly about Hamas, and Russia's offer for instance to engage in talks with Hamas in early March. What's the U.S. position on that? Are you concerned about Russia's invitation?

Ambassador Burns: I think Secretary Rice has made our position abundantly clear. And of course we are working with the Quartet, which includes Russia, to try to send a unified and single message to Hamas. And Secretary Rice has made very clear what that is, and that is that Hamas has to accept the right of Israel to exist, and Hamas has to renounce violence and renounce terrorism. So the onus is on Hamas to do that.

Matthew Chance: Are you concerned that Russia seems to have broken ranks with the rest of the Quartet and taken the step of inviting Hamas.

Ambassador Burns: We believe that it's very important that the international community be unified and send a unified message. And you remember just immediately following the Palestinian elections there was a Quartet meeting in London where there was such unity, and we seek to preserve that unity.

Matthew Chance: The issue of Russia. You are here visiting today. The discussions you have been having are about the G-8 chairmanship, correct? How concerned are you about Russia's new kind of assertiveness in foreign policy? Is that a concern for Washington, that it's putting itself at the center of the big diplomatic issues of the day: the Iran crisis, the Middle East peace process? This is a new thing.

Ambassador Burns: Well I think it's been very gratifying, and very positive, to see Russia take a constructive position as it has on Iran. Russia has offered a perfectly reasonable proposal. We support the Russian effort, and I said again today to the Russian government that we will continue to support the Russian effort. Russia is a valued member of the Quartet in the Middle East, and of course since September 11 of 2001 Russia has been a partner of the United States on the issue of trying to pursue the global war on terrorism. Now we don't agree on every issue, the United States and Russia, but on those issues in particular we have had a large degree of uniform behavior and uniform action. Russia is an important country in the world, and we seek of course to have a close relationship with it, and when we can act together of course the international community is much more powerful and its voice is much more clear, and hopefully on these issues we undertake we'll be more effective.

Matthew Chance: Thank you very much.

Ambassador Burns: Thank you very much Matthew.

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