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Deadlines Loom in Iran Nuclear Standoff

R. Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs

Excerpt From NPR's Talk of the Nation With Neil Conan
Washington, DC
August 21, 2006

QUESTION: Stay with us if you would, Dominique Moisi, and you too as well, Trita Parsi. Joining us now from his office at the State Department is Nicholas Burns, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs. And thanks very much for being with us today.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: It's a pleasure. Thank you.

QUESTION: And we've been discussing the dilemma posed by this upcoming set of deadlines with Iran. The administration keeps saying Iran knows what it needs to do, to stop enriching uranium. Yet Iran has answered - often and publicly - it seems to have no intention of giving up its nuclear program. Is there a way to bridge this gap?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, I think what we've got to do is wait for Iran to answer the question formally, and I expect that will happen in the next several days. This is not just a demand of the United States. This is a demand of France and Britain and Germany, the European Union, Russia, China. All of us have come together over the last year to tell the Iranians that we're quite willing to negotiate with them. We're quite willing to sitting down.

On the part of the United States, that's a considerable step forward. We haven't spoken to the Iranians officially in 27 years, but we're not willing to do it. But they have to suspend their enrichment programs and reprocessing programs first.

I suspect they're going to say this week they're not willing to do that. I hope they don't say that, but I suspect they will. And if they say that they cannot meet that condition, then there's going to be a security council resolution with sanctions passed in the month of September because that is what we have all agreed we have to do.

This has gone on for a number of years. And the Iranians have to understand that there is not unlimited patience in the international community pertaining to their nuclear weapons designs.

QUESTION: We are speaking with Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns. He's speaking with us from his office at the State Department. We're discussing the situation regarding Iran. If you'd like to join the conversation, our number is 800-989-8255. Our e-mail address is talk@npr.org. And you're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

The package of concessions that was put forward by the permanent five plus one - Germany - is that a starting point from your point of view? Or is that a take it or leave it offer?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, we put forward two offers to the Iranians. First we said there is a positive path forward, and if you would suspend your enrichment programs at your plant at Natanz, we are willing to take a number of initiatives together - all of us - to meet you halfway and to make this worth your while.

If you're not, there's a second path. And that path would lead to sanctions. So we laid that in front of the Iranians on June 6th. Javier Solana did that on behalf of the permanent five members of the security council. There were two subsequent meetings where they get into great amount of detail about what we'd be willing to do in negotiations with Iran.

But I must say - and this is Javier Solana's view - Iran didn't give him anything back to warrant any kind of hope on our part that they intended to meet the conditions laid down. This is a long storyline. The Europeans have been negotiating with the Iranians for a number of years. There had been many, many resolutions of the IAEA Board of Governors in Vienna, of the security council. It's now time, we think, for Iran to answer this question.

Because, frankly, there's a widespread suspicion internationally - and not just in Washington, but even in places in Russia and China and Europe - that the Iranians are secretly developing a nuclear weapons program. And so we, of course, are trying to head that off. We're trying to contain it, and we're trying to turn it around.

And if the Iranians can't be straightforward with us, then we're going to have to take these sanction steps. And Iran will deserve them because they've had plenty of time to respond to this.

QUESTION: What makes you think, though, that coercion - whether it's diplomatic or the sanctions get progressively stronger - that coercion's going to work?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: I can't assure you that sanctions will be - will work. But I can assure you that it will raise the cost to Iran. It will increase their isolation. Sanctions, which may start with dual use exports, visa sanctions, will eventually grow to more serious sanctions.

And the Iranians are going to have to feel the pain - the Iranian government - of that kind of concerted action by the international community and by the isolation that comes with it. Iran is not like North Korea. North Korea seems to thrive in its isolation, or at least glory in it. Iran doesn't.

It has an integrated economy with Europe and with the Middle East. It cannot afford to be in a situation where it's an international pariah because it's trying to build a nuclear weapons program.

So I can't guarantee sanctions will work, but all of us, Russia, China, the Europeans, the United States all believe it's best

the way forward. And after all, we're seeking a diplomatic solution here. We're trying to make diplomacy work. And so we've tried to give some positive incentives for Iran as well as the negatives incentives of sanctions. We would just hope they'd chose that positive path, but it doesn't look like they're going to head down that positive path, unfortunately.

QUESTION: In pursuit of a diplomatic solution, could at some point the military option be on the table? Could that be part of the negotiations?

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: Well, President Bush has said all along that as president, he's not going to take the military option off the table. And that just makes, that's just good common sense. I think everyone understands that. This morning in his press conference, the president said we are looking for a diplomatic solution. We're trying to make - I think he said we're trying to make diplomacy work. And so this is our diplomatic strategy to try to reason with the Iranians, but our patience cannot be unlimited.

What Iran wants to do, obviously, what their design is, tactically - they're trying to delay and delay and delay so that they continue their nuclear research. They've admitted they're trying to string centrifuges together in a cascade in their experimental research at Natanz. If they can experiment with 1,000 or 2,000 or 3,000 centrifuges in a cascade, that would give them the scientific knowledge to develop a nuclear device. We need to stop them before they get there.

And so diplomacy, in this case, is designed to arrest their nuclear development and to bring them to the negotiating table. But if they don't respond to that, of course, then, of course, we'll have to consider a variety of other means. But we're giving diplomacy a very, very strong emphasis here, and we have been for the last year and a half.

QUESTION: Secretary Burns, thanks for your time. We appreciate it.

UNDER SECRETARY BURNS: It's a pleasure. Thank you very much.

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