

Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Senator Richard G. Lugar
Opening Statement for Hearing on Iran
March 29, 2007

I join in welcoming Secretary Burns back to the Committee. We appreciate his efforts on many diplomatic fronts and look forward to his testimony on the critical topic of American policy toward Iran.

In testimony before our Committee last September, Secretary Burns outlined the administration's policy of supporting an international dialogue with Iran, while backing up that willingness to negotiate with the prospect of UN sanctions.

Six months have passed and Iran's leaders have thus far rebuffed the international community's offer to negotiate an acceptable arrangement for their nuclear program. As a result -- thanks in part to U.S. leadership -- the UN Security Council has voted twice to impose sanctions, and may do so again should Iran continue on its path of defiance.

This multilateral approach to the problem, I believe, has directly bolstered U.S. efforts to encourage foreign governments and banks to curtail commercial benefits to Iran, thereby enhancing the impact of UN sanctions.

The task for American diplomats must be to sustain international will and solidify an international consensus in favor of a plan that presents the Iranian regime with a stark choice between the benefits of accepting a verifiable cessation of their nuclear program and the detriments of proceeding along their current course.

The United States has in place extensive unilateral economic sanctions against Iran. Some have suggested that the Congress should pass legislation targeting additional unilateral sanctions against foreign companies that invest in Iran. I understand the impulse to take this step. But given the evident priority that the Iranians assign to their nuclear program, I see little chance that such unilateral sanctions would have any effect on Iranian calculations. Such sanctions would, however, be a challenge to the very nations that we are trying to coalesce behind a more potent multilateral approach to Iran. We should not take steps that undermine our prospects for garnering international support for multilateral sanctions, which offer better prospects for achieving our objectives than unilateral measures.

Iran poses challenges to U.S. interests in the region beyond its nuclear program. Iranian policies in Iraq, Lebanon, and in the Israeli-Palestinian arena threaten our interest in a stable Middle East. Iran's expansionist foreign policy and the bombastic rhetoric of its president have also fed concerns among its neighbors that it seeks to dominate the region and interfere in their internal affairs.

As with the nuclear issue, an effective U.S. strategy for Iran should leverage the concerns of other governments in pursuit of a united front toward objectionable Iranian policies. While enlisting the support of regional governments is critical, we should avoid any calls to exploit Shi'ite-Sunni tensions. The spread of sectarian conflict from Iraq to other parts of the Middle East is decidedly not in the interest of the United States or the people of the region.

As the United States pursues sanctions at the United Nations, it is important that we continue to explore potential diplomatic openings with Iran -- either through our own efforts or those of our allies. Even if such efforts ultimately are not fruitful, they may reduce risks of miscalculation, improve our ability to interpret what is going on in Iran, and strengthen our efforts to enlist the support of key nations. In this regard, the U.S. decision to participate in the conference of Iraq's neighbors earlier this month was a welcome step forward.

Secretary Rice's personal effort in pursuit of peace between Israel and the Palestinians also is a welcome development that could help diminish the appeal of extremists in the region, backed by Iran, who call for confrontation with Israel. History has demonstrated that progress on this difficult issue rarely is achieved without sustained and active U.S. diplomacy.

Secretary Burns, it is a pleasure to have you with us today. I look forward to your insights on these matters.

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