

Make the choice clear to Iran: No deal means economic collapse

By Editorial
Board

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, shown last fall at the U.N., is the good cop in the nuclear negotiations, assuring he would work to clinch a nuclear deal despite hard-liners' protests. But his boss says the U.S. "cannot be trusted." (Timothy A. Clary, AFP/Getty Images)

Congress, it's time to force Iran's hand on nukes.

President Barack Obama and his foreign policy team worry that the long and so-far-fruitless talks on Iran's nuclear capabilities will collapse if Congress passes new, tougher economic sanctions on Tehran.

The president pledged in his State of the Union address to veto new sanctions legislation. He has enlisted British Prime Minister David Cameron to press Congress to sit back and wait.

House Speaker John Boehner's response: I see your prime minister and raise you a prime minister. Without consulting with the White House, Boehner invited Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu to address Congress next month on the threats posed by Iran and by Islamic terrorism.

Mercy. Pass the smelling salts.

What's going on? When comedians bomb in front of an audience, they break out in "flop sweat." American nuclear negotiators have a little more than five months to go before a June 30 deadline to reach a deal with Iran. But you can already see the flop sweat: Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken told a Senate committee this week that talks could be extended beyond the June deadline.

That would be the third extension in this diplomatic slow dance.

Republican Sen. Mark Kirk of Illinois and Democratic Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey are expected to introduce the latest version of their Iran sanctions bill next week. They drew bipartisan support for a similar measure last year, but their efforts were stuffed by Harry Reid, then the Senate majority leader. That won't happen with the Republicans in charge of the Senate.

The Kirk-Menendez bill would impose stifling new sanctions on Iran if negotiations fail to reach an agreement. Note the key word: *If*. Nothing would happen before the June 30 deadline passes. Nothing would happen if an agreement is reached.

If the deadline passes without an agreement, the bill would trigger sanctions that would torpedo Iran's oil and banking sectors and blacklist its mining, engineering, shipbuilding and construction industries. The goal: To create more incentive for Iran to give up its ambitions for nuclear weapons and avoid a devastating blow to the nation's economy, which has already been staggered by Western sanctions and tumbling oil prices.

The bill would give Obama some flexibility under certain conditions to waive the new sanctions for 30 days at a time.

An interim nuclear deal reached in November 2013 provided some economic sweeteners to Iran and established a



six-month term for negotiations to reach a final agreement. "If Iran does not fully meet its commitments during this six-month phase," President Obama said, "we will turn off the relief, and ratchet up the pressure."

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That warning was hollow. More than a year and two deadline extensions later, the relief is still in place but no final deal is in sight.

The Iranians, meanwhile, don't seem worried about the West walking away from the table. Iran still stonewalls international inspectors, refusing to allow them to visit sensitive nuclear or military sites. Iranian officials have refused for years to answer questions about the country's nuclear weapons-related experiments.

Nor is Iran shelving its nuclear ambitions while talks drone on. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif recently announced that Tehran has begun to build two more nuclear reactors. That's not a good-faith gesture during negotiations to roll back Tehran's nuclear program. That's a thumb in the eye.

Meanwhile, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and his boss, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, are playing good cop-bad cop with Western negotiators. Rouhani, the good cop, said earlier this month that he would work to clinch a nuclear deal despite hard-liners' protests. He said Iran couldn't thrive as an international pariah, deprived of international investment, squirming under harsh sanctions.

Then came Khamenei, the bad cop, who said the United States "cannot be trusted" to lift all sanctions if a deal is reached. He declared that Tehran should launch an "economy of resistance," boosting local production of some goods and cutting the country's reliance on oil export cash.

In his 2014 State of the Union address, Obama rightly boasted that the Iran sanctions "we put in place helped make this opportunity (for a nuclear deal) possible." Now Iran's economy is reeling from Western sanctions and the crash of oil prices. Its bargaining position is shaky. That doesn't guarantee a good deal, or any deal, particularly if Iranian negotiators figure they can stall indefinitely without more consequences.

U.S. and Iranian negotiators reportedly seek to hammer out a framework for a deal by the end of March. They'll know then, they say, if a final deal is possible by June 30.

At some point, the music has to stop. New sanctions should be set to kick in on June 30 if no deal has been reached. The president can call Congress the bad cop, but he shouldn't stand in the way.

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