Congress Balks at Obama's UN Move on Iran Deal

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President Barack Obama has a new hurdle to selling his Iran deal on Capitol Hill: Bipartisan opposition to his decision to submit the nuclear accord to the United Nations before Congress votes on the agreement.

Sens. Bob Corker (R-Tenn.) and Ben Cardin (D-Md.) said on Thursday afternoon that they disagreed with the U.S. pushing the agreement through the UN before Congress votes this September to approve or reject it, a troubling development for an administration still trying to win over both men.

Cardin, the top Democrat on the committee, questioned Vice President Joe Biden about the matter during a closed door meeting with committee Democrats on Thursday. He said Biden responded with an explanation of the “differences between the executive and legislative branches.” That didn’t satisfy Cardin, who said Obama should put the brakes on UN consideration until Congress has 60 days to review the bill, a period that technically hasn’t even started yet because the agreement has not been formally submitted to Capitol Hill.

“There was nothing to be lost by waiting until after the review period was over,” Cardin said in an interview. “It could be inconsistent [with how Congress votes] and therefore it would have been better if that had been deferred until after the 60-day period.”

Corker called Obama’s move an “affront to the American people.” He chastised U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power by telephone on Thursday morning and said because Congress has not yet voted on lifting sanctions that are crucial to the deal, the UN is moving forward on an international agreement they may not be able to implement.

“I question the judgment of our president,” Corker told reporters, fuming into the microphones as Biden escaped a press scrum down a narrow flight of stairs. “This is exactly what we were trying to stop. We wanted the American people to understand this agreement before it went in place.”

White House spokesman Eric Schultz said the UN process “does not lessen the importance of Congress or its review.”

“We will not begin implementation of the plan until after the Congressional review period is over,” Schultz said.

Despite frustrations among key lawmakers, the White House was making steady inroads with skeptical Democrats as officials blanketed lawmakers with briefings by Biden, top security officials and personal phone calls. Both the House and the Senate will get all-members briefings next week.

In nearly a dozen interviews with lawmakers exiting this week’s briefings, Democrats seemed reassured by answers they were getting, suggesting the administration can build the support it needs to sustain a veto of any GOP legislation that would scuttle the deal.

“He answered a whole series of difficult and demanding questions and provided encouraging and thoughtful responses,” said Sen. Chris Coons (D-Del.) of Biden.

Meanwhile, Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, a conservative aspirant for the GOP presidential nomination, announced his intent to delay all State Department nominees and legislation to authorize the agency until Obama tells Cruz that he will block a UN vote.

“It seems your administration intended all along to circumvent this domestic review,” Cruz wrote in a letter to the president. “That Samantha Power has already introduced a draft resolution to the Security Council portrays an offensive level of disrespect for the American people and their elected representatives in Congress.”

It’s unclear how widespread the ramifications of the administration’s submission to the U.N. will be. But it doesn’t appear to be doing the administration any favors with Cardin, a key swing Democrat that the administration is likely to need on its side, or Corker, the undecided chairman who will lead an aggressive hearing schedule over the next two weeks.

But the popular congressional review law crafted by Cardin and Corker includes no provisions that punish the administration for submitting the deal to the United Nations before Congress votes, leading Republicans like House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of California to accuse Obama of violating the “spirit” of the law rather than the law itself.

Other lawmakers shrugged off the dispute. Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn (R-Texas) called it “immaterial” to lawmakers’ role in deciding whether or not to lift congressional sanctions, and Sen. Tim Kaine (D-Va.) said it was wholly consistent with the long-debated nuclear review law that states the UN and administration can lift “sanctions that Congress didn’t have anything to do with.”

“You could certainly argue with the tactic, but it was very plain,” Kaine said.

Biden huddled with committee Democrats for more than an hour, giving each of nine Foreign Relations Democrats a chance to ask the former chairman questions about nuclear inspections and enforcement. Biden reassured fellow Delawarean Coons on lifting the arms embargo on Iran, explaining there are “alternative ways for us to prevent the Iranians from engaging in the sale of conventional arms in the region.”

Shortly before the Biden briefing on Thursday morning more than a dozen Jewish Democratic lawmakers huddled with Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes and Jeffery Prescott, a senior director with the National Security Council. Attendees said the White House stayed away from making sales pitches about Obama’s legacy or securing a win for the White House with a sustained veto.

“There was zero politics,” said New York Rep. Steve Israel, who is skeptical of the Iran deal.

“We wanted to hear about how the money that would be available to Iran once the sanctions were repealed and one of the most important answers to that is that Iran wants sanction relief because their economy is in great trouble,” said Illinois Rep. Jan Schakowsky, a supporter of a deal with Iran. ”[They said the] money would be used to help the economy.”

California Rep. Adam Schiff, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said Rhodes reiterated that the White House was prepared to use force if Iran violated the terms of the nuclear deal. That’s of paramount concern to hawkish Democrats who have questioned the ability of the U.S. to attack Iran if the regime continues to build up its nuclear capacities or ignores inspection requests from the International Atomic Energy Agency.

“I think it was very helpful. Some came into the meeting ready to support the administration. Others, like myself, are going to continue to reserve judgment. There are a lot of people I want to talk with to help inform my decision,” Schiff said.

That work trying to move the influential bloc of House Democrats followed a Wednesday afternoon White House visit by Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, Kirsten Gillibrand of New York, Tom Carper of Delaware, Michael Bennet of Colorado and Martin Heinrich of New Mexico. Of particular concern to the White House are incumbent Bennet, Gillibrand, who represents a large Jewish constituency, and Manchin, a fiscal and social conservative who’s dovish on foreign policy.

Manchin sounded inclined to back the deal with “everything that I’m seeing now.” His support would be a major boon for the administration, but he said in an interview that he won’t make a final decision until Kerry, Moniz and Lew give a classified briefing for all senators next week.

“Are we better to move down this path or no path at all?” Manchin asked rhetorically. “I will feel much better next week when we get a secured briefing.”

“The meeting was very useful, I thought the description of the type of transparency and oversight they have in place was reassuring,” Gillibrand said.

Reassuring enough to vote for it? “I’m going to continue to review before I make decision.”