



Joseph R. Biden, Jr.

UNITED STATES SENATOR - DELAWARE

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Contact: Elizabeth Alexander/Annie Tomasini
202-224-5042

BIDEN on Iran: Now is the Time for Aggressive Diplomacy, Including Direct U.S. Engagement

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Washington, DC –Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee **Joseph R. Biden Jr. (D-DE)** held a hearing this afternoon entitled "*Meeting the Iranian Challenge*," to assess the overall effectiveness of U.S. policy toward Iran, with a primary focus on the Iranian nuclear program. The hearing addressed how well the United States coordinates efforts with the major world powers to make it clear to the international community and the Iranian people that it is their government that is choosing isolation over cooperation. William J. Burns, Under Secretary for Political Affairs at the State Department, testified before the Committee.

The full text of Sen. Biden's opening statement from this afternoon's hearing is below:

"Ambassador Burns, welcome. It is good to have you back in Washington.

"Let me get right to the point of today's hearing and let me be blunt: in my view, as a result of the policies this administration has pursued, Iran, not freedom, has been on the march in the Middle East. Iran's influence has grown in Iraq. Its proxy Hezbollah is ascendant in Lebanon. Its ally Hamas dominates Gaza. It is testing intermediate range missiles. And Iran is getting closer to a nuclear weapons capacity by mastering the process of uranium enrichment.

"The issue is not whether Iran presents a real security challenge. It does. The question is whether we have a realistic view of that challenge -- and a coherent policy to deal with it. Iran is not ten feet tall. It is not the Soviet Union at the height of its power. Despite its large oil reserves it faces serious economic problems -- including high inflation and unemployment. It has very few friends and its people chafe under social and

political repression. It spends about \$7 billion on defense every year – about what we spend in Iraq every two weeks.

“But Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear weapon would dramatically destabilize an already unstable region and probably fuel a nuclear arms race in the region. It is profoundly in our interest to prevent that from happening.

“Our choices are straightforward. We either engage, maintain the status quo, or use some sort of military force.

“If we don’t engage, we’re stuck with a Hobson’s choice between an ineffectual policy that allows our partners but not the United States to engage Iran on its nuclear program... and military strikes that could quickly spiral out of control.

“Last week, in response to an ‘incentives package’ that the Permanent Five Members of the United Nations Security Council and Germany – the so-called ‘P-5 plus one’ – put on the table, Iran said it is willing to begin comprehensive negotiations. Time will tell. But it did not indicate that it will suspend its uranium enrichment activities as a pre-condition for talks.

“Now, as you consult with other capitals on the response to Iran’s response, I respectfully urge you to find creative ways to advance dialogue with Iran by building on the steps that the Administration has already taken. Among those steps was Secretary Rice’s decision to personally sign a letter to the Iranian foreign minister transmitting the incentives package. That may seem like a minor gesture, but I’m told that her signature was taken as a sign of real support for the incentives package, not just by Tehran, but more importantly by our ‘P-5 plus one’ partners.

“Other, similar steps could solidify the ‘P-5 plus one’ coalition. For instance, I’ve seen reports suggesting that the Administration is considering establishing an American diplomatic presence in Tehran for the first time in 30 years. That’s a good idea. A diplomatic presence would increase our knowledge of the forces at work inside Iran. It would give us a stronger diplomatic hand to play and it would decrease the chances of miscalculation. It also would help us more effectively operate exchange programs to increase contacts between the American and Iranian people. The world should see whether Iran will accept such a mission.

“More broadly, Mr. Ambassador, I think the time has come for us to strike a new bargain with our ‘P-5 plus one’ partners. The net effect of demanding preconditions that Iran rejects is this: We get no results and Iran gets closer to the bomb.

“And by the way, the ‘P-5 plus one’ already is negotiating with Iran. What else should we call a process in which the ‘P-5 plus one’ presents a detailed offer to Iran, which comes back with a counter-offer, which produces a response from the ‘P-5 plus one’? I call that a negotiation.

“I believe the United States should agree to directly engage Iran, first in the context of the ‘P-5 plus one’, and ultimately country-to-country, just as we did with North Korea. Remember, after we pulled out of the Agreed Framework, we insisted that North Korea fully disclose and abandon its uranium enrichment program as a pre-condition for resuming talks. Pyongyang refused and instead increased its stockpile of plutonium 400 percent.

“We finally got smart and reengaged without the precondition – and now we have a realistic chance of securing a verifiable end to North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. There is a long way to go, still – we have to verify – but, we are making progress. Direct U.S. engagement with Iran is something that the European Union, Russia, and China have told me they would welcome.

“In exchange, we should insist on firm commitments from those governments to impose serious sanctions if Iran continues to defy the U.N. Security Council by not suspending uranium enrichment and work related to plutonium reprocessing.

“Engaging Iran and sanctioning Iran are not only compatible, they are mutually reinforcing. Sanctions can provide leverage for negotiations. I know this point will not be lost on you, Mr. Ambassador, given your central role in the outreach to Libya.

“We also need to do a much better job with our public diplomacy. We should exploit cracks within Iran’s ruling elite, and between its rulers and its people. Iran's people need to know that their government is choosing isolation over cooperation. The way we position ourselves, we’re made to look like the bad guys.

“So does the wider international community. We need to publicize the incentives offered to Iran. These include greatly expanded trade and properly safe-guarded, state-of-the-art nuclear reactors suited for producing energy, not for producing material for a weapons program.

“The foreign ministers of the ‘P-5 plus one’ should use every opportunity to stand together and make clear to the world as well as to the Iranians all the benefits that Iran is forgoing. When it comes to countering Iran’s regional influence, we have to be smarter with our diplomacy. We can undermine Iran’s connection to Hezbollah by actively supporting Israeli-Syrian peace talks. We can weaken Iran’s ally Hamas with success in the peace process that undercuts the claim that terrorism is the path to a Palestinian state.

“As to Iran’s influence in Iraq, the idea that we could wipe out every vestige of that is a fantasy. Even with more than 140,000 American troops in Iraq, our ally in Baghdad, Prime Minister Maliki, greets Iran’s leader with kisses on both cheeks. He travels to Tehran to consult, explain and seek approval. Like it or not, Iran shares a long border – and a long history – with Iraq.

“The best way to promote more responsible Iranian behavior in Iraq is for Iran to confront the possibility that instability could spill over Iraq’s borders. We can do that by making clear our intent to begin to redeploy most American combat forces out of Iraq. Not everyone, but we do not need 140,000 troops there. Right now, Iran likes it exactly as it is – with the United States bogged down and bleeding, and our ability to present a credible military threat considerably reduced.

“Mr. Ambassador, I believe that now is the time for aggressive diplomacy with Iran, including direct U.S. engagement. There is still a realistic chance, but not a guarantee, that the world can change Iran’s behavior. And if we go the extra diplomatic mile, the world is much more likely to stand with us if diplomacy fails.

“We didn’t do that in Iraq. We shouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

“I look forward to your testimony. Senator Lugar.”

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