Congress Continues to Focus on the Iran Nuclear Deal; The Administration Continues to Scrutinize Russia’s Activities; UNGA Opens in New York City

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Iran Nuclear Deal

On Thursday, 10 September, the Senate failed to pass a motion to invoke cloture on the resolution disapproving of the Iran nuclear deal (H.J.Res. 61) by a vote of 58-42. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Kentucky) immediately filed a new motion, teeing up another vote on the measure this week. President Barack Obama issued a statement lauding the results of this procedural vote, called a “filibuster,” which blocked consideration of the resolution altogether.

On 10 September, the House of Representatives passed H.Res. 411, finding the President has not complied with the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act, by a vote of 245-186. On Friday, 11 September, the House voted 247 to 186 on H.R. 3460, a resolution that would prevent the President from lifting sanctions. Neither measure is expected to end up on President Obama’s desk for his signature. The House also considered a measure approving of the Iran nuclear deal, which failed by a vote of 162 to 269, in a vote that put Democrats on record in support of the agreement. President Obama issued a statement Friday afternoon expressing gratitude to those lawmakers – led by House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi (California) – that took care to judge the deal on the merits, adding that the United States can join its global allies and partners in taking steps that will allow for the implementation of the comprehensive deal.

Meanwhile, Speaker of the House John Boehner (R-Ohio) did not rule out including language that would seek to block implementation of the Iran nuclear deal onto a short-term Continuing Resolution, or suing President Obama in an attempt to block the accord.

• On Thursday, 17 September, the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East will hold a hearing titled, “Major Beneficiaries of the Iran Deal: IRGC and Hezbollah.”

Russia/Ukraine Crisis

In Kyiv on Saturday, Assistant Secretary of State for Eurasian Affairs Victoria Nuland warned that Russia would pay “more costs” for future violations of the Minsk agreements. She stated, “If and when Minsk is fully implemented, including [the] return of Ukraine sovereignty of its border, we can begin to roll back some sanctions.”

Last week, Senator Jack Reed, the top Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, confirmed that forces from the U.S. Army’s 173rd Airborne Brigade are training Ukrainian National Guard troops at a base in western Ukraine and will soon begin training regular military troops. He noted that regular military forces training will begin within the next two weeks, once the U.S. forces have finished training the National Guard. Senator Reed (Rhode Island) further stated that he supports
providing Ukrainian forces with lethal aid.

Syrian and Iraqi Crises

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov spoke by phone twice this week, amid reports of Russian military activities in Syria. Secretary Kerry reportedly warned that any escalation of conflict that might lead to greater loss of life, further increase refugee flows, and risk confrontation with the anti-ISIL Coalition. The White House also reiterated concerns that Russia was providing support for the Assad regime, further highlighting what may be another point of disagreement between the two governments.

Following continued reports of the Syrian refugee crisis in Europe, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said last Thursday that President Obama has decided to raise the number of Syrian refugees admitted to the United States to at least 10,000 in the next fiscal year beginning 1 October, from fewer than 2,000 this year. While Earnest emphasized that the President would ensure existing background and medical checks that can take as much as two years to complete are maintained, some Republican Members of Congress warned that President Obama could be allowing in potential terrorists.

Also last week, an official confirmed that the U.S. Government has identified at least four occasions on both sides of the Iraq-Syria border where ISIL has used mustard agents, likely in powder form. Syria is supposed to be free of chemical weapons after the Syrian government handed over 1,180 tonnes of declared toxic agents and precursor chemicals to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. The official suggested that the U.S. intelligence community believes ISIL is likely manufacturing mustard powder.

- On Wednesday, 16 September 2015, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee will hold a hearing titled, “Syria, Iraq, and the Fight Against ISIS.”

Customs Measure Update

Deputy National Security Adviser for International Economic Affairs Caroline Atkinson said at a Brookings Institution event last week that Congress should act quickly to pass a final version of the customs enforcement bill, noting it contains important enforcement and currency provisions. Reconciliation of a customs bill likely will not happen before October, particularly as Congress seeks to pass a stopgap spending bill to keep the federal government funded – and open – beyond 30 September, when Fiscal Year 2015 concludes.

TPP Update

Takeo Mori, the lead Japanese negotiator on Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) auto issues, was in Washington last week for talks with Acting Deputy U.S. Trade Representative Wendy Cutler and negotiators from Canada and Mexico on outstanding automotive issues in the TPP, including rules of origin.

TTIP Update

EU Trade Commissioner Cecilia Malmström is expected to meet with Ambassador Froman in Washington on 22 September for an assessment of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations. The EU hopes the bilateral meeting will yield a concrete schedule for dealing with sensitive issues prior to the next round of negotiations in Florida next month.

Countering Cyber Attacks

At a House Intelligence Committee hearing last Thursday, Director of National Intelligence (DNI) James Clapper testified that hackers are likely to shift the goals of their cyber attacks from stealing information to manipulating information in order to undermine confidence in it. He further suggested this tactic has the potential to wreak havoc on the American financial system. CIA Director John Brennan, FBI Director James Comey and Defense Intelligence Agency Director Lt. Gen. Vincent Stewart joined DNI Clapper in painting a bleak picture of the host of dangers emanating from the cyber world. They testified that nation-states, criminal groups, and terrorist organizations all pose a threat to U.S. economic and national security.

Upcoming Chinese Head of State Visit

In advance of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit later this month, U.S. and Chinese negotiators
reportedly met this week to continue discussing a possible Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT). During June’s Strategic & Economic Dialogue, both countries pledged to exchange revised negative lists before the upcoming presidential visit. Deputy National Security Adviser Atkinson confirmed last Wednesday that BIT negotiations will be part of the economic agenda during President Xi’s visit. The agenda will also include discussions on currency, cyber issues, and several policies put in place by Beijing that U.S. information technology firms have alleged adversely impact their ability to do business in China.

- On Thursday, 17 September, the Senate Armed Services Committee will hold a hearing titled, “Maritime Security Strategy in the Asia-Pacific Region.”

UNGA Ahead

With the 70th Session of the U.N. General Assembly due to open in New York City this week, President Obama has nominated the following individuals to participate in the U.S. delegation: Representative Barbara Lee (D-California); Representative Chris Smith (R-New Jersey); and Cassandra Butts, Senior Advisor to the CEO of the Millennium Challenge Corporation. UNGA General Debate begins on Monday, 28 September.

Looking Ahead

Washington will likely focus on the following upcoming matters:

- 15 September: 70th Session of the U.N. General Assembly (UNGA) opens in New York City
- 16-22 September: Next round of EGA negotiations
- 24 September: Pope Francis to address Congress and meet with President Obama
- 24-25 September: President Obama hosts Chinese President Xi Jinping
- 28 September: General debate of the UNGA begins
- 7 October: President Obama hosts German President Joachim Gauck
- 16 October: President Obama hosts South Korean President Park Geun-hye
- 19-23 October: 11th Round of TTIP Negotiations to be held in Miami, Florida
- [TBD] November: President Obama hosts Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu
- 30 November-11 December: U.N. Global Climate Conference in Paris
- 15-18 December: 10th WTO Ministerial Conference to be held in Nairobi, Kenya

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