

# What Congress's Iran Letter Signals About Obama's Diplomacy

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](#)

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## To gain skeptics' support, the president needs to make the substantive case for his Iran policy and be willing to take their concerns on board.

**F**or all the controversy over the open letter to Iranian leaders, led by Sen. Tom Cotton, the text merely underscored what is already well-known: Members of Congress in both parties have deep reservations about the trajectory of U.S. diplomacy with Iran, and they are concerned about what a nuclear deal reportedly contains and what might be omitted. The *Wall Street Journal*/NBC poll out this week found that this skepticism is shared by 71% of Americans.

These reservations are understood by the Iranians and other foreign officials. Congress's likely response to a nuclear deal is a matter of great interest overseas (and surely a leading topic of conversation when foreign leaders visit with U.S. lawmakers and vice-versa). On the substance of U.S. policy toward Iran, some foreign partners -- including Israel but also Arab allies in the Middle East -- share many of the stated congressional concerns. They worry that a "bad" deal will leave in its wake an empowered Iran and disengaged United States.

At this stage, virtually any deal the Obama administration negotiates will face deep skepticism at home and abroad. In Congress, this could mean a refusal to lift sanctions; among allies, it may lead to efforts to match Iran's nuclear capabilities or other hedging. This is a problem for President Obama, his successor, and anyone else who wants to see a sustainable diplomatic outcome that advances U.S. interests. Securing domestic and allied support will be vital to a deal's success, whatever its content.

Even as it has compromised with Iran, however, the Obama administration has been uncompromising with critics. Administration officials have derided skeptics as warmongers and seem willing to gamble that, once concluded, an agreement will prove impossible to overturn or will produce a broader shift in Iranian policies that ultimately

vindicates their approach.

All this has increased skeptics' misgivings rather than alleviating concerns. The administration's confrontational manner may ultimately succeed with Congress, given the president's authority over foreign policy. But when it comes to allies -- over which the U.S. holds no veto -- such tactics are likely to backfire, especially if relations have been strained. It is unrealistic to expect Congress or allies simply to acquiesce if they think that the White House is dismissing their concerns.

The good news, however, is that most members of Congress and ordinary citizens who are skeptical about a deal are not warmongers but support a negotiated agreement. The same is true of U.S. allies, with whom we share many interests in the region. Whatever President Obama's feelings about the open letter, he should engage with critics. That a deal would be costly and difficult to reverse is not a reason to avoid addressing skeptics now, but precisely why it's better to do so. The national security implications demand that he seek broad support for any agreement.

To gain skeptics' support, the president needs to make the substantive case for his Iran policy and be willing to take their concerns on board. He also needs to look beyond a deal and try to reassure allies that the U.S. will remain committed to our mutual interests and to the Middle East in the negotiations' aftermath; if, as reported, a deal is imminent, this effort should have begun long ago.

Diplomacy is not just about negotiating with adversaries. It is also about bringing along one's allies and domestic constituencies, without whose support an agreement would be a hollow achievement. Leadership is not simply about exercising prerogatives; it is also about persuading others to follow.

*Michael Singh is managing director of The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the Wall Street Journal blog "[Think Tank.](http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/03/12/what-congresss-iran-letter-signals-about-obamas-diplomacy)" (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/03/12/what-congresss-iran-letter-signals-about-obamas-diplomacy>)* ❖

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