

Thursday, 5 September 2013

U.S. Congress and Syria: it's complicated



Despite the relatively good start that the Obama administration is having with Congress in requesting authorization for military action on Syria, the final outcome will largely depend on the language of the bill and the scope and the cost of the operation that will need to be narrowed down to convince the vast majority of undecided members.

Ever since Obama's decision to refer the Syria response decision to Congress on Saturday, the issue has taken over the headlines and dominated the legislative agenda. Key leaders and members of the House's and the Senate's foreign relations/affairs committees cut their summer holiday and rushed back to Washington this week for meetings with the president. There is a sense of urgency that is driving the Syria debate, and the administration would like to see a prompt vote on U.S.-led military action in Syria as soon as next week.

Early incentives for Obama

In the five days since the referral, the Obama administration has reasons to be optimistic on getting approval from Congress. However, many factors are still in play and could at this stage, drive the debate in either a yay or nay direction. The administration has made good strides this week in garnering bipartisan support from the Senate foreign relations committee for a strike (10-7 votes), as well as winning the backing of the congressional leadership in both the House (Republican) and the Senate (Democrat). Obama also managed to sway influential members into supporting military action, such as minority leader Nancy Pelosi, the head of the intelligence committee in the House, Mike Rogers and Senators Bob Menendez and Barbara Boxer, both of whom voted against the Iraq war.

The support of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) for Obama's move is undoubtedly helping shape congressional views. Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen has moved from the no to "leaning yes" camp, and members close to AIPAC such as Eric Cantor have come out in support of military action.

In this effort, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is leading the administration narrative for strikes, whether in facing the skeptic lawmakers or building the public case for action. America's top diplomat has become the face of the administration's Syria policy and he knows Syrian President Bashar Assad better than any other official around Obama. Kerry, as a senator and later as secretary of state, was driving the engagement track with Assad in attempts to resume peace talks with Israel and draw a wedge with Iran. He was a frequent visitor to Damascus prior to 2011, before turning today into the most forceful voice in holding Assad accountable for the alleged use of chemical weapons against Syrians.

Majority still undecided

But despite Kerry's impassioned plea and the leadership's support, the Congress' approval is nowhere near guaranteed and Obama's effort could fall apart if the vast majority of undecided members remain in that column or don't buy the administration's argument.

The fate of the bill depends on key variables that will be crucial to watch next week as the Congress goes back into session and a more comprehensive debate on Syria takes place.

First and foremost is the language in the proposed bill. Most of the undecided members from both parties would like to see a narrower and more limited military mission. Amendments to the initial authorization restricting any military action to mostly 60 days (House) or 90 days (Senate), and clearly stating that there will be no troops on the ground, reflect a war-weary Congress that will try its best to limit any operation that Obama orders in Syria. Kerry has been trying to assure the lawmakers over such concerns, but the language in the final version of the resolution will ultimately decide its chances.

The meetings behind doors, which the administration and military leaders are convening with Congress, will also determine the path of the bill. Questions about the nature of evidence that the U.S. has, the role of Hezbollah, and the military targets were all dodged in open hearings and referred to the classified sessions. Another issue of concern from both parties is the cost of the operation, at a time of sequestration and budget cuts in the Pentagon and U.S. government. While Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel estimated it at "tens of millions," many members will try to get a price tag for the mission. The economic concerns top the priorities of the American public, and as polls show large opposition for the strikes (48-29%), Obama himself will need to do more to sell the argument to the public and reach the 218 and 60 threshold in the House and the Senate .

These variables make it less likely that a vote will be held promptly on Syria. With Obama traveling, and many members of Congress observing the Jewish New Year, the debate will probably go on for another week, with a vote more likely to come after the anniversary of Sept. 11.

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