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White House indicates Trump would sign new sanctions bill

Associated Press

Posted July 23, 2017

July 23, 2017

Updated July 23, 2017 12:40pm



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Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of N.Y. pauses during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington.

WASHINGTON >> The White House indicated today President Donald Trump would sign a sweeping Russia sanctions measure, which the House could take up this week, that requires him to get Congress' permission before lifting or easing the economic penalties against Moscow.

Lawmakers are scheduled to consider the sanctions package as early as Tuesday, and the bill could be sent to Trump before Congress breaks for the August recess. The legislation is aimed at punishing Moscow for meddling in the presidential election and its military aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the newly appointed White House press secretary, said the administration is supportive of being tough on Russia and "particularly putting these sanctions in place."

"We support where the legislation is now, and will continue to work with the House and Senate to put those tough sanctions in place on Russia until the situation in Ukraine is fully resolved," Sanders said on ABC's "This Week."

Congressional Republicans and Democrats announced Saturday that they'd settled lingering issues with the bill, which also includes stiff economic penalties against Iran and North Korea. The sanctions targeting Russia, however, have drawn the most attention due to Trump's persistent push for warmer relations with President Vladimir Putin and ongoing investigations into Russia's interference in the 2016 campaign.

"North Korea, Iran and Russia have in different ways all threatened their neighbors and actively sought to undermine American interests," according to a joint statement by California Republicans Kevin McCarthy, the House majority leader, and Ed Royce of California, the Foreign Affairs Committee chairman. The bill the House will vote, they said, "will now exclusively focus on these nations and hold them accountable for their dangerous actions."

The White House had objected to a key section of the bill that would mandate a congressional review if Trump attempts to terminate the sanctions against Moscow. Top administration officials said the provisions infringed on the president's executive authority and tied his hands as he explores avenues of cooperation between the two former Cold War foes. But Sanders said the White House was able to work with the House and Senate to "make those changes that were necessary."

Lawmakers included the review because of wariness in both parties over Trump's affinity for Putin. Rep. Eliot Engel of New York, the top ranking Democrat on the Foreign Affairs Committee, said Trump has been unwilling to respond seriously to Russia's belligerence, "leaving Congress with the urgent responsibility to hold Vladimir Putin accountable."

McCarthy had pushed to add the North Korea sanctions to the package. The House had overwhelmingly passed legislation in May to hit Pyongyang with additional economic penalties, but the Senate had yet to take up the bill.

The Senate last month passed sanctions legislation that targeted only Russia and Iran. Congressional aides said Senate Republicans may resist adding the North Korea penalties, but it remained unclear whether those concerns would derail the legislation.

The aides were not authorized to speak publicly and requested anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Although the legislation has widespread support, the bill stalled after clearing the Senate more than five weeks ago due to constitutional questions and bickering over technical details.

The House and Senate negotiators addressed concerns voiced by American oil and natural gas companies that sanctions specific to Russia's energy sector could backfire on them to Moscow's benefit. The bill raises the threshold for when U.S. firms would be prohibited from being part of energy projects that also included Russian businesses.

McCarthy and Royce said other revisions resolved concerns that the sanctions could have unintentionally complicated the ability of America's European allies to maintain access to energy resources outside of Russia.

The congressional review requirement in the sanctions bill is styled after 2015 legislation pushed by Republicans and approved in the Senate that gave Congress a vote on whether then-President Barack Obama could lift sanctions against Iran. That measure reflected Republican complaints that Obama had overstepped the power of the presidency and needed to be checked by Congress.

According to the bill, Trump is required to send Congress a report explaining why he wants to suspend or terminate a particular set of sanctions. Lawmakers would then have 30 days to decide whether to allow the move or reject it.

The North Korea sanctions bill included in the package bill cleared the House by a 419-1 vote, and House Republicans became frustrated the Senate didn't move quickly on the measure given the vast bipartisan support it received. The measure bars ships owned by North Korea or by countries that refuse to comply with U.N. resolutions against it from operating in American waters or docking at U.S. ports. Goods produced by North Korea's forced labor would be prohibited from entering the United States.

The sanctions package imposes mandatory penalties on people involved in Iran's ballistic missile program and anyone who does business with them. The measure would apply terrorism sanctions to the country's Revolutionary Guards and enforce an arms embargo.

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