

By Patricia Zengerle



WASHINGTON (Reuters) - After 20 years working on international relations in Congress, Representative Ed Royce takes over the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee with one goal firmly in mind: a harder line, with tighter sanctions, on Iran.

So low-profile that some fellow Californians call his dad, former Orange County water official Ed Royce Sr., "the real Ed Royce," the 11-term Republican congressman has garnered less national attention than most new heads of major committees.

Royce's appointment has raised expectations that the House panel, after two years of bitter divisions and little action, could be less partisan and more productive.

He has been on the committee throughout his career in Congress, inspired by his father, who helped liberate the Dachau concentration camp in Nazi Germany while serving in General George Patton's Third Army during World War Two.

Royce insists that foreign policy can be bipartisan - and cites strong support from both Democrats and Republicans for Iran sanctions as an example.

The atmosphere on Capitol Hill could be even more conducive to tougher measures against Iran if Senator Robert Menendez, a sanctions champion, succeeds Senator John Kerry as Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman, as is expected. President Barack Obama has nominated Kerry to be Secretary of State.

Royce faults Obama for doing too little to push for change in North Korea or to stop Tehran's nuclear programs. The White House says it has helped enact the toughest sanctions in history on Iran.

But, despite being considered one of the most conservative Republicans in Congress, Royce was not among the harshest Republican critics of the White House in the most bitterly partisan foreign policy event of 2012: the Obama administration's handling of the attacks in Benghazi, Libya.

He even applauds Obama for initiatives including free trade agreements with South Korea, Colombia and Panama; improved relations with Burma, and actions to boost human rights and fight AIDS in Africa.

"He has had a very long career and has emerged as an open, honest, straightforward and I think collaborative cooperative figure," California Republican strategist Jonathan Wilcox said.

As an influential Republican foreign policy voice, Royce said his top priority will be measures to choke Iran's economy and force it to stop its nuclear enrichment program. "I am very much in favor of crippling sanctions on Iran," he said in an interview.

"I think we should list that as the top priority in the nation right now. It's going to be our greatest concern, especially given the experimentation that Iran is doing with miniaturizing nuclear weapons and their attempt to obtain a three-stage ICBM capability," Royce said.

Iran says its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes.

GETTING BILLS TO THE FLOOR

Royce's low-key style contrasts with that of his predecessor as committee chair, U.S. Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, known for fiercely defending the U.S. embargo of Cuba and as a sharp partisan critic of the Obama administration.

"Ed Royce and I are going to get along together just fine," said Rep. Eliot Engel, the committee's new top Democrat. "He is low-key, but very knowledgeable and has a very astute and good sense."

The two congressmen will visit Taiwan, China, the Philippines and South Korea together later this month.

Foreign policy analysts said Royce's approach should help the committee get more legislation through Congress and to the White House for Obama's signature.

"For authorizing committees, that's the biggest challenge. Can we get our bills out of committee and onto the floor? And the answer for the last few years has been not just 'no,' but 'hell, no'," said Danielle Pletka of the conservative American Enterprise Institute.

Royce, 61, has been a U.S. congressman since 1993, easily winning re-election for 11 terms in the Orange County area, a Republican stronghold in a mostly Democratic state.

He worked as a tax manager before entering politics as a California state senator. A fiscal conservative, Royce is also on the House Financial Services Committee.

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF SHIFT IN SENATE

Royce said he would seek to eliminate waivers on Iran sanctions. The Obama administration has renewed exceptions for all 20 of Iran's major oil buyers twice since Obama signed the sanctions into law a year ago, in return for those nations significantly reducing their purchases of Iranian oil.

He also said he will look for more ways to clamp down on Iran's entire energy industry and make it harder for foreign companies to sell any commercial goods to Iran, as well as to deplete or freeze Tehran's remaining foreign currency reserves.

Menendez, a Democrat, championed a series of new sanctions that took effect last year that require buyers of Iranian oil to make significant cuts to their purchases, or risk being cut off from the U.S. financial system.

The measures have been credited with helping cut Iran's oil exports by more than 50 percent, costing Iran up to \$5 billion per month, severely choking its economy. But Tehran has not yet agreed to international conditions on its nuclear program.

Royce said his other priorities for the committee include using sanctions to pressure North Korea over its weapons programs, increasing the use of U.S. broadcasting as a foreign policy tool, pushing for free trade, and pressing the White House to approve a permit for TransCanada Corp.'s Keystone XL pipeline.

"Energy has become a national security issue and as technology continues to improve, there will be more debates like the one on Keystone. I want to see the committee in an active role on that pipeline. I've held hearings on it in the past and I think that's still going to be very much in play," Royce said.

The U.S. State Department could rule on the pipeline early this year, but environmental groups are expected to push for further delays.

(Editing by Warren Strobel and Doina Chiacu)