

## Policy Watch: Putin and Ahmadinejad

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Russian President Vladimir Putin welcomed the June 2005 election of the staunchly anti-American Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president of Iran. Ahmadinejad, though, has proven to be a difficult partner for Putin -- especially regarding the Iranian nuclear issue.

At the end of Sept. 2005, Putin and Ahmadinejad (who had just taken office the previous month) met in New York where they both had come to attend the annual opening of the U.N. General Assembly. According to a Russian press account, the meeting did not go well: Putin "tried to persuade him to back away from the radical position he has now taken. The Iranian leader proved extremely intransigent and bluntly told his Russian counterpart that Tehran would not make any concessions or curtail its nuclear program... That no doubt displeased Vladimir Putin, because an Iran that possesses nuclear weapons is just as unacceptable to Moscow as it is to Washington."

The following month, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Putin in Moscow to urge him to join the United States in voting at the International Atomic Energy Agency governing board meeting in November to refer Iran to the U.N. Security Council. The Russians, however, insisted that this was not necessary. Moscow then renewed its initiative to resolve the crisis by proposing that Russia enrich uranium for Iran. To make the idea more palatable, Moscow proposed that this be done by a joint Russian-Iranian venture in Russia. But while the United States and the EU-3 were willing to go along with this proposal, Tehran made it clear that it preferred to enrich uranium in Iran.

The Putin administration genuinely appears to have believed that it was offering a solution to the crisis. Moscow, then, felt let down by Tehran's lack of cooperation, especially after Russia had done a number of things for Tehran, including: the launch of a remote-sensing (i.e., spy) satellite for it in Oct. 2005, and the signing in November 2005 of a \$1 billion contract to sell Iran 29 Tor M-1 SAM air defense systems along with Pechora-2A SAM systems. Losing patience with Tehran, Moscow let it be known in Jan. 2006 that it might join the United States and others on the IAEA governing board in referring the Iranian nuclear dossier to the U.N. Security Council. Tehran responded by sending Iranian National Security Council Chief Ali Larijani to Moscow shortly before the IAEA vote with the message that Iran now took a more positive view of Moscow's proposal for a Russian-Iranian joint venture to enrich uranium for Iran in Russia, but still insisted that the proposal had to be "refined."

On Feb. 4, Russia joined with most other members of the IAEA governing board in voting to refer Iran to the U.N. Security Council. The Iranian press denounced Moscow for its "betrayal." President Ahmadinejad responded by announcing Iran's withdrawal from the IAEA Additional Protocol, which allowed surprise inspections by IAEA officials of facilities in signatory countries. A few days later, the Iranian foreign minister declared Tehran's willingness to continue talks with Moscow about its proposed joint venture to enrich uranium, but only if part of the joint venture would be located in Iran. Moscow pointed out that this condition would be unacceptable to the United States and EU-3, but Tehran held firm to it. On Feb. 26, 2006, Tehran announced that Iran had agreed to a Russian-Iranian joint venture to enrich uranium in Russia, but on March 12, Tehran said this proposal was not on. One Russian press account saw this move as retaliation for Moscow adopting a position on Iran similar to that of the EU-3 and the United States.

Russia's position, though, was not the same as theirs. Russian officials have repeatedly

indicated that Moscow will not support a Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Iran, thus portraying itself as Tehran's protector. In addition, Russia (along with China) has expressed opposition even to the imposition of economic sanctions against Iran by the Security Council. Although Moscow responded negatively to Ahmadinejad's April 2006 claim that Iran had "joined the nuclear club" through enriching uranium to power plant level, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was insistent that the Iranian nuclear problem could not be resolved through the use of force.

On the other hand, there was recognition in Moscow that the United States might undertake unilateral military action against Iran. Gen. Yury Baluyevsky, chief of the general staff of the Russian Armed Forces said that, "in the event of such a conflict, Russia would maintain neutrality." This would be consistent with Russian behavior with regard to other U.S.-led military interventions Moscow disapproved of, such as in Kosovo and Iraq.

On June 6, the five permanent members of the Security Council, along with Germany, presented Iran with a series of proposals aimed at inducing it to renounce enriching uranium on its own territory. Ali Larijani later noted that they contain "some positive points" and Ahmadinejad called them "a step forward." But much to the frustration of the international community, Iran has refused to respond to them until the end of Aug. 2006. The United States and the EU-3 want a Security Council resolution that at least imposes economic sanctions on Iran if it does not accept the June 6 proposals, but Russia and China have balked even at this.

Moscow sought to allay criticism from America and the EU-3 for its softer approach toward Iran by indicating that it could still help resolve the crisis diplomatically. Indeed, Putin himself expressed optimism about this after his meeting with Ahmadinejad at the June 2006 Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit, held in Shanghai.

By July 2006, however, Moscow seemed to become disillusioned by Ahmadinejad's delay in responding to the June 6 proposals for resolving the Iranian nuclear issue. Indeed, Lavrov said that this "absence of a positive reaction from Iran... runs counter to what President Ahmadinejad told the president of Russia a month ago." But Lavrov again ruled out Security Council support for the use of force against Iran. He did, however, suggest that Russia might support economic sanctions. But then Moscow backed away from this.

Russia voted in favor of U.N. Resolution 1696 (which passed by a 14-1 vote on July 31, 2006) that called upon Iran to verifiably suspend all nuclear enrichment activities by Aug. 31, 2006 or to face further Security Council measures. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak said, however, that what Moscow liked about the resolution was that it did not "carry the automatic threat of sanctions," either military or economic. Yet despite the Russian Foreign Ministry urging Iran to accept Resolution 1696, Iran rejected it. But Larijani said Iran "will continue developing relations with Russia and China, despite their supporting" the passage of this resolution.

Putin apparently continues to believe that his proposal to enrich uranium for Iran in Russia offers a way out of the crisis that would benefit Iran, America, the EU-3, and of course, Russia. He is frustrated that Ahmadinejad has not accepted this proposal, especially after America and the EU-3 have, at least in principal. He may hope that if the crisis gets worse, Ahmadinejad might accept it as a way of avoiding conflict with the United States. Ahmadinejad, however, has so far exhibited no serious interest in Putin's proposal.

Nor does he seem likely to.

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