

## Policy Watch: Nukes divide Russia, Iran

Published: March. 23, 2007 at 3:17 PM

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While long perceived in Washington as friends, Russia and Iran clearly do not regard each other as such at present. The Russian Atomic Energy Organization, after many years of delay, has almost finished work on the nuclear reactor Moscow is building for Iran at Bushehr, and was supposed to start supplying the enriched uranium for it to run on. Moscow, though, has stopped work on the reactor and said it will not deliver the fuel because Tehran has stopped making payments owed to Russia. Tehran hotly denies this, claiming that it has paid Moscow everything it is due.

Underlying this dispute is the increasing Russian fear that Iran might well use the atomic energy capacity Moscow is building for it to acquire nuclear weapons. On March 18, Interfax quoted Russian Security Council Secretary Igor Ivanov as stating that Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons "would be a threat to Russia's interests," and that "we are doing everything to prevent this."

The New York Times reported on March 19 that Moscow has informed Tehran it will not deliver the fuel for Iran's nuclear reactor unless Iran suspends its uranium enrichment program which many fear it will use to develop weapons grade material.

The Bush administration has reportedly encouraged a tougher Russian stance on the Iranian nuclear issue by supporting a plan for Iran's uranium to be enriched in Russia. This would both provide profits to Russia as well as ensure that Iran's uranium would only be enriched to the lower level needed for an atomic energy reactor and not to the higher level required for a weapon. Up to now, though, Tehran has insisted upon enriching at least some uranium inside Iran.

It is not yet clear whether Iran will back down and agree to Russia enriching all its uranium, or if Russia will indeed refuse to deliver the fuel needed for the Bushehr reactor if Iran does not. Washington would be happy with either outcome. Instead of improving Russian-American relations, though, either outcome could sow the seeds of further misunderstanding between Moscow and Washington.

This is because the two sides have very different expectations from each other. If Moscow gets Tehran to agree to Russia enriching all its uranium -- and even more so if Tehran does not agree and Moscow follows through on its threat not to deliver fuel for Iran's nuclear reactor -- Moscow will expect significant compensation from Washington.

Washington, by contrast, has long seen the Iranian atomic energy program as something Moscow should not have been supporting in the first place. It should not be necessary, in the American view, to compensate someone for halting or reversing an action that is harmful not just to others, but even to itself.

It is not, of course, just Russian support for the Iranian nuclear program that Moscow and Washington have had this difference of opinion over. Indeed, this difference in outlook has existed ever since the end of the Cold War. Moscow, for example, thought it was due major compensation from America and the West for allowing the downfall of communism in Eastern Europe and withdrawing its armed forces from there. America and the West, by contrast, saw

both the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet military presence in these countries as illegitimate to begin with, and thus not deserving significant compensation. There have been similar differences between Moscow and Washington since then over many other issues.

It is highly likely, then, that Moscow will see itself entitled to significant compensation from Washington for not delivering fuel for the Iranian nuclear reactor if Tehran refuses to freeze its nuclear enrichment program. At the same time, Washington will see preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons as being as beneficial to Russia as to all other countries, and therefore will not be willing to make significant concessions to get Moscow to stop hurting its own interests by helping the Iranian nuclear program.

Thus, even if Russia ends up not supplying fuel for Iran's nuclear reactor, Russian-American relations are not likely to improve.

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