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Moscow Tilts toward Tehran in Controversy over Iran Nuclear Program Report

An International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report released on November 8 contains disturbing and “credible” information supporting the conclusion that Iran has obtained some of the expertise needed to build nuclear weapons should it decide to do so. The report marks the first time that the IAEA has directly linked Iran’s nuclear program to weapons production. The warhead work contradicts Tehran’s obligation not to pursue nuclear weapons under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Iran’s ambassador to the United Nations, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, called the IAEA report “unbalanced, “unprofessional,” and “politically motivated,” saying that it was the result of “political pressure mostly by the United States.” Before the report was released, Iranian President Ahmadinejad told an Iranian television audience that the IAEA Director General Yukiya Amano was “just delivering papers that American officials hand to him” and repeated past claims that Iran is not making nuclear weapons. However, the report spurred the United States, Britain and France to openly suggest the need for tougher measures against Iran. Even before the IAEA report was published, there had been intense speculation in the press that Israel was considering a military strike on Iran’s nuclear installations.

Russia, like China, harshly criticized the IAEA report. Both countries reportedly asked the IAEA not to publish the annex to the document, which dealt with the military dimension of Iran’s program. Moscow also said it contained no new information and could damage the chances for a negotiated solution to the nuclear standoff. (In the current impasse Russia is calling for a step-by-step process under which existing sanctions would be eased in exchange for action by Iranian authorities to dispel international concerns). Deputy Foreign Minister Gatilov said Russia would not support tougher sanctions.

Russia undoubtedly has little interest in seeing Iran with nuclear weapons. It has long had relatively close political, economic, and security ties with Tehran, however, and has claimed that

too much pressure on Iran is counterproductive. Seeking a middle ground, Russia reluctantly approved four rounds of UN sanctions on Iran in recent years even as it has worked with China to water them down. Nevertheless, even this qualified Russia support strained Moscow's relations with Tehran, with the two sides frequently trading barbs in recent months. Moscow no doubt hopes that coming down firmly on Iran's side in the debate over the report this week will help improve relations.

A prolonged stalemate over Iran also enhances Russia's international influence, especially after Moscow stood on the sidelines while unrest in the Arab world swept away regimes that Russia once supported. Russia now regrets failing to veto the UN resolution authorizing the military action that toppled Moammar Khadafy. Moscow also is an important backer of Syria, a key ally that is also backed by Iran.

The Iran issue, moreover, gives the Kremlin leverage in its relations with the United States. Cooperation on the issue is often cited by US officials as a central achievement element of the US-Russia Reset. Many Russian officials accept privately that Washington has legitimate concerns about Iran's nuclear program. However, the tone of bilateral relations seems to be changing. The Kremlin is displeased, according to Viktor Kremenyuk, "with recent criticism in Washington, including [US] disappointment in Medvedev and disapproval of Putin's presidential candidacy." This has made it more willing to flout US preferences over Iran, probably in the hope that he can move back toward Washington in exchange for other concessions later.

British Foreign Secretary Hague has noted that the IAEA member states would meet in board session next week to deal with the Iran issue. The board could opt, by majority vote, to refer Iran once more to the UN Security Council but such an action would collide with a certain Russian or Chinese veto. Any additional steps against Tehran, as a result, are likely to be relatively minor – for example, tightening EU financial and travel sanctions to match those already in place in the US. The deep split in international opinion over how to deal with Iran is in any case threatening to undermine the work of the IAEA and politicize its work. That byproduct of the current impasse may be precisely what leaders in Moscow and Beijing have in mind.