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After years of stalemate, negotiations over Iran's controversial nuclear development program seemed to progress last week when an Iranian delegation in Vienna agreed to the export and modification of its low-enriched uranium. The resulting optimism did not last. Officials in Tehran demurred, insisting that they needed more time to study the proposal and could not meet Friday's deadline to ratify the agreement. While Iran's stonewalling came as a disappointment to the United States, it did not come as a surprise. Over the past month, the White House has signaled that it is preparing a new, more severe round of sanctions in case current negotiations fail.

The United States has reached out to many countries for help in implementing its strategy, but none more so than Russia, which has come to play an increasingly central role in the battle over the Iranian nuclear program. In September, President Dmitri Medvedev stirred hopes after he emerged from a meeting with President Barack Obama and hinted that the Kremlin might be open to the idea of new sanctions on Iran. Together with China, Russia has long been considered Tehran's patron at the UN, and many U.S. analysts believe that sincere Russian cooperation may prove to be the key component in bringing the program in line with international strictures.

Yet recent events suggest that U.S. confidence in Russia's willingness to wield both carrot and stick may have been misplaced. After a visit from Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated that "threats, sanctions, and threats of pressure in the present situation are counter-productive." Ensuring the point was lost on no one, Vladimir Putin, Russia's prime minister and erstwhile president, said that talk of sanctions was "premature."

Russia's evasiveness is sure to frustrate the Obama administration, which will need Moscow's support if it seeks effective sanctions against Tehran. But any attempt to gain such cooperation must take into account Russia's history with and interests in the Iranian nuclear project. A U.S. plan that underestimates the deep and extensive ties that bind the two countries will leave the United States bereft of Russian support at the negotiating table.

In January 1995, Viktor Mikhailov, the Russian minister of atomic energy, and Reza Amrollahi, the chair of the Atomic Energy Agency of Iran, negotiated an $800 million contract to complete a reactor in the Iranian city of Bushehr, which a German firm had abandoned after the 1979 revolution. Construction at the original Bushehr plant had marked Iran's foray into the development of nuclear power. (Previous reactors, supplied primarily by the United States, were dedicated to research.) Russia's decision to revive the reactor infuriated U.S. officials and hindered efforts to thaw relations between the two countries.

Cooperation between Russia and Iran continued relatively smoothly over the following years, and leaders from both sides were quick to redress any emerging problems. When work on Bushehr fell behind schedule in 1998, Russian Atomic Energy Minister Yevgeny Adamov visited Iran and pledged greater involvement of Russian technicians in the project.

Under the stewardship of Vladimir Putin, Russia intensified the nuclear cooperation, even as the United States placed increasing pressure on Moscow to help curtail the program. While President Bill Clinton successfully persuaded Boris Yeltsin to cancel plans to supply Iran with gas-centrifuge uranium technology in the summer of 1995, his administration failed to extract meaningful concessions from Putin. Moscow brushed off accusations in 1998 that Russian firms were transferring missile technology to the Iranians, including designs that could carry nuclear warheads. In 2000, a series of high-level, bilateral meetings that included Vice President Al Gore and Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson failed to convince Russia to curb support for the project.

Still, Russian support for Iran has at times appeared to wane: in 2002, Moscow chastised Iranian leaders for concealing details of a uranium enrichment program, and in June of 2004, Russia pledged that it would halt work at Bushehr if Iran continued to defy international demands. In February of 2007, officials delayed a fuel shipment over alleged "missed payments"; eight months later, after the return home of some Russian nuclear technicians from Iran, Putin reiterated that Tehran must comply with UN resolutions before Bushehr could be completed.

Yet despite its threats, Russia has shown little willingness to enforce its own demands. Moscow has built continuously at Bushehr and provided key technical guidance to Iran. Perhaps more troubling to the United States, Russia has trained more than 1,500 Iranian nuclear scientists, equipping them with the ability to carry out nuclear research indigenously and potentially transform a latent capability into weapons technology.

How does Russia benefit from its nuclear cooperation with Iran? Simple economics provides a compelling first answer: The Russian economy has not only reaped the benefits of the Bushehr deal, but it has also been bolstered by the sale of fuel and the potential sale of additional reactors. What's more, the nuclear project is only one of many economic agreements between the two countries. Total bilateral trade hovers around $2 billion, as Russia supplies Iran with consumer goods, oil and gas equipment, and military technology. Russia also enjoys privileged access (along with China) to Iran's Southern Pars gas fields.

Russia's withdrawal of support for the Iranian nuclear program might jeopardize these other lucrative deals. Even more problematic, Russian government officials rarely resign from their high-power positions at state-owned companies, so they stand to gain personally from continued or increasing ties with Iran. This enmeshing of public and private interests has complicated Russian foreign policy for years, and would make Moscow's break with Iran tremendously difficult.

Second, Iran is still a powerbroker in the Caspian oil trade; its position on the Caspian Sea, which is estimated to hold more than 10 billion tons of oil reserves, makes it an important and influential partner for Russia. Tehran has been extensively involved in coordinating transnational oil and gas deals, arranging transportation of exports with a number of regional states. Russia is in a position to use its good relations with Iran to challenge Washington's efforts to create new pipelines and foreign direct investment in the Caspian region. Iran has already proven an effective regional ally for Russia--in addition to cooperating on energy deals, Tehran has pointedly refrained from criticizing Moscow's Chechnya policy and has held strategic meetings with Moscow on the Taliban.

Finally, Russian nuclear cooperation with Iran provides the Kremlin with leverage over the United States. Moscow remains guarded against Western advances into its "near abroad," and has fought to keep neighboring states from being brought into the NATO fold. By dangling the Iranian nuclear issue in front of the United States, Moscow may believe it has a means to maintain regional dominance. Russian leaders have already extracted concessions from Washington, as the United States recently altered plans for missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic. Yielding on the Iran issue would strip Moscow of the ability to coerce the United States and damage its own ability to reassert local influence.

If the United States seeks true Russian support, it must find a way to compensate Moscow for the losses it will incur by forsaking Iran. Washington will continue negotiating with both countries, and it remains possible that the parties may agree on a compromise that would give Iran a reprieve from further sanctions. But the Obama administration, wary of Tehran's

promises, is likely to continue laying the groundwork for future penalties in the case of Iranian backtracking. As it does so, it is worth remembering that Russia has already supported multiple rounds of UN Security Council sanctions, but only those that have not imperiled its own interests.Efforts to court Russia that do not account for the country's long and profitable investment in the Iranian nuclear program rely on misplaced optimism, and will likely end in diplomatic disappointment.

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