

Russian Nuclear Pact Stalls

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Tensions Prompt U.S. to Reconsider Proliferation Agreement

WASHINGTON -- The Bush administration's landmark nuclear-cooperation agreement with Russia is unlikely to gain passage before President George W. Bush leaves office, the latest sign of how Russia's offensive in Georgia has roiled the international scene.

The accord, which Mr. Bush and Russia's then-President Vladimir Putin signed in 2007, would allow for greater U.S.-Russian cooperation in developing proliferation-resistant reactors and nuclear fuel banks. The White House saw the pact as enhancing post-Cold War strategic cooperation between Washington and Moscow on issues ranging from weapons proliferation to alternative energy supplies.

The Bush administration initially presented a bill to Congress in May in the hope it could be passed into law by September.

An administration official familiar with National Security Council deliberations said Friday the White House is now "reviewing all options regarding Russia," as a result of the Georgia conflict, including its support for the nuclear-cooperation initiative. "It's no longer business as usual," the official said.

In addition, leading congressional officials said there's little chance of the nuclear pact being approved by Congress before the current session ends, a result of rising opposition to the bill among key lawmakers in the House of Representatives and Senate.

Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said this week he's no longer going to push the bill during the current session, after concluding a fact-finding trip to Georgia. The Democrat, who has been mentioned as a possible vice presidential candidate, said he'd initially been inclined to favor the pact.

"Russia's actions have already erased the possibility of advancing legislative efforts to promote U.S.-Russian partnership...including an agreement to allow for increased collaboration with Russia on nuclear energy production," Sen. Biden said in a written statement.

The deal's uncertain future is the latest example of how the Russian-Georgian conflict has changed the international landscape. Earlier this month, the Bush administration and Poland reached an agreement to base part of a planned U.S. missile shield on Polish soil, a move long in the works that sped up as a result of the conflict.

The delay also represents a blow to the Bush administration's anti-proliferation efforts, which are a cornerstone of its attempt to better secure the international supply of nuclear materials. At the same time, the White House is struggling to complete a similar deal with India.

Earlier this month, a long-simmering conflict between Russia and Georgia over two Georgian provinces burst into open conflict, in which Russian forces battered their opponents before agreeing to a ceasefire. Western governments, who to varying degrees decried Moscow's actions, have since complained that the Russians aren't abiding by the terms of the agreement, but have few options to address the situation.

To be sure, current and former U.S. officials say that cooperation between Washington and Moscow on issues ranging from weapons proliferation and energy security could still move ahead, once the conflict in Georgia is resolved. Indeed, they say the Bush administration's nuclear-cooperation pact could be picked up by a successive administration. And some are even calling for an enhanced U.S.-Russia dialogue over key national-security issues, once the Georgia crisis subsides.

"We need to develop a solid framework" for a renewed dialogue with Russia, said Thomas Pickering, a former U.S. ambassador to Moscow, at a conference this week. As a model, he cited the Bush administration's current high-level strategic dialogue with China, headed by Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson.

Even before Russia's battles with Georgia, the nuclear-cooperation agreement had sparked a sharp debate inside Washington over the future path of U.S.-Russian relations.

The Bush administration and other supporters of the accord viewed its implementation as essential to nurturing Moscow

as the West's partner on key strategic issues, such as denying Iran nuclear weapons. They also believed U.S.-Russian nuclear cooperation could serve as the cornerstone of a new international nonproliferation regime.

The White House has sought to persuade developing nations against mastering a nuclear-fuel cycle in their pursuit of alternative energy sources due to related risk of weapons proliferation. The U.S. sought instead to develop an international nuclear fuel bank these nations could draw upon. And Russia, with among the world's most advanced nuclear-energy industries, was seen as potentially hosting the fuel bank. Fuel banks store the processed nuclear fuels that can be used in electricity-generating power plants.

Russia also had high hopes for the accord and the impact it could have on its nuclear industry, which had been one of the most advanced under the Soviet system but later found itself short of funding and orders.

In recent years, the Kremlin has set up a new state-run company to expand the nuclear industry, seeking out contracts to build and service plants outside Russia, as well as making a major new investment in Russia's own civilian-nuclear program. The industry is one of several the Russian authorities are promoting in an effort to wean the economy away from its dependence on oil and gas.

Opponents of the nuclear accord have argued Russia can't be trusted as a partner, citing Moscow's strategic ties to rogue states such as Iran and Syria. Moscow is currently assisting Tehran in building a light-water nuclear reactor in the Iranian city of Bushehr and has also supplied Iran with conventional weapons systems in recent years.

These critics say Moscow's actions in Georgia clearly undercut the arguments of some U.S. strategists who've sought to define the new Russian government as a potentially benign player on the international stage.

"As goes the nuclear deal, as goes U.S.-Russia relations," said Henry Sokolski of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center, a Washington think tank that opposes the Russia agreement. "By walking away from the agreement, the administration will be less willing to make excuses for Moscow."

Still, many U.S. national security strategists say any U.S. effort to engage in a new Cold War with Russia risks further destabilizing a global order already facing rising threats from conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan and the wider Middle East. They note the Kremlin could seek to further undercut U.S. efforts to promote peace agreements in the Middle East and to end the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea.

In a troubling sign, U.S. officials point to Syria's call this week for enhanced military cooperation with Russia. President Bashar Assad met with his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, in Moscow and praised the Kremlin's actions in Georgia as a strike against Western hegemony. The Russians, in turn, said they were prepared to provide new weapons systems to Damascus.

"We have always said to the Russians that these sales should not go forward, that they don't contribute to regional stability," State Department spokesman Robert Wood said Friday. "I urge them not to go through with these sales."

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