

Pravda: Bushehr nuclear plant launch delayed over new crisis in Russia-Iran relations

Contributed by Administrator
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Moscow has delayed the start-up of Iran's first nuclear power station to 2008 because Tehran has fallen behind with payments for the Bushehr plant, a top Russian official said on Thursday.

The timing of the plant's start-up is significant as it is viewed by Israel and the United States as an important element in a nuclear drive which they suspect is a front for developing nuclear weapons. Iran says the program is entirely peaceful.

Russia has repeatedly delayed the plant which under the latest schedule was due to be started up in September 2007. A Russian sub-contractor said on Wednesday the plant, in southwest Iran, had no chance of being launched before autumn 2008.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Kislyak said in Baku that Tehran was still behind in payments for the plant and that the delay was not political.

"It will clearly not be possible to start-up the atomic station this year so it will be moved to the next year," Kislyak told reporters, citing the payment problems, Reuters reports

"We are fully determined to take Bushehr to its logical conclusion and launch the atomic power station," he said.

The Itar-Tass news agency earlier reported Kislyak had said Bushehr would be inaugurated in early 2008.

shipping parts for the plant from other countries.

Bushehr is Iran's first nuclear power plant.

Tuesday, the United Nations' nuclear agency said it will inspect Iran's heavy-water nuclear reactor under construction in Arak early next week.

Iran agreed two weeks ago to allow inspections by the end of this month as part of an agreement aimed at resolving questions about its nuclear activities.

The U.N. Security Council has already imposed two sets of sanctions on Iran because of its refusal to suspend uranium enrichment, and there are calls for more, voanews.com reports.

Russia has repeatedly rejected Iranian claims that the Bushehr plant could be launched this year -- a position welcomed in Washington, which has urged Moscow to delay the launch.

The Bushehr power plant is considered proliferation safe, but Washington fears that Iran's civilian nuclear program could cover nuclear weapons development.

Earlier today, a Russian subcontractor working on Bushehr called a 2007 start date 'unrealistic, adding, 'the real date for the physical launch of the power plant is being delayed until autumn 2008.'

Construction stalled earlier this year over charges that Iran had fallen behind on payments, as well as delays in shipping parts for the plant from third countries, Thomson Financial reports

'Payments are coming now, but not in the amount we need. This has affected our subcontractors' financial situation,' Atomstroieksport spokeswoman Yesipova said.

Source: agencies

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A New Crisis in Russia-Iran relations by Kaveh L Afrasiabi

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Moscow's decision to postpone the completion of a 1,000-megawatt reactor in Bushehr, Iran, has shocked Tehran and is bound to bring Russia-Iran relations to a crisis point, this at a time when neither country can afford to have such a negative impact on their geostrategic considerations.

On August 15, President Mahmud Ahmadinejad is due in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, to attend (as an observer) a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the regional security organization launched by Russia and China and encompassing the Central Asian states. Iran can potentially contribute to the SCO's security-related priorities and, certainly, to its anti-terrorism center.

Yet compared with last year when there were lively discussions, particularly in the Russian press, of Iran's inclusion as a member of SCO, not only is there no such talk this year but, worse, the crisis over Bushehr threatens the wellspring of the entire Iran-Russia relationship.

As usual, the Kremlin has veiled its "playing politics with Bushehr" by hiding behind its private contractors involved with the Bushehr project, who insist their announcement that Bushehr will not go operational this autumn as planned and will at the earliest the following autumn, is purely financial in nature.

According to Grigory Noginsky, chairman of the Federation Council Commission for Nuclear Energy, payments made by Iran for the construction of the plant "were in fact stopped in the beginning of the year. Even if Iran fully resumes payments today, there is such a notion as inertia, and I think that the launch will be possible in reality no earlier than in summer-autumn 2008."

This is nonsense, the Iranians insist, and they have threatened to go public by publishing all the records of Iran's regular payments to the Russian nuclear subcontractors. Noginsky's announcement coincided with a high-level Iranian delegation heading to Moscow to discuss the matter, making it look like a peremptory move on Russia's part to assure those talks are futile.

Thus the fate of the US\$1 billion nuclear project has been cast under a thick cloud of uncertainty. "Confidence in the project has been undermined," Irina Yesipova, the spokeswoman for Atomstroieexport, which is building the Bushehr plant, told Interfax news agency.

As a result, confidence in Russia-Iran relations has been seriously undermined. From Iran's vantage point, there is no doubt that Moscow has appeased Washington, whose officials have openly asked Russia not to complete Bushehr.

This year, Russia also reneged on its contractual obligation to deliver nuclear fuel to Iran. Iran has a separate agreement with Moscow on nuclear fuel, which should have been respected. According to Ahmad Gharib, a former official of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization in charge of nuclear fuel, Iran can now complain against Russia for "failure to fulfill its contractual obligations". Gharib and a number of other Iranian current and/or former officials have criticized Tehran's "lack of political will" with respect to Russia's constant manipulation of its nuclear partnership with Iran for the sake of its relations with the US.

In a press interview on Wednesday, Ali Larijani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, once again accused the US of trying to deprive Iran of "nuclear technology and know-how". Certainly, Russia's willingness to accommodate the White House's objectives against Iran go a long mile in that direction. Gharib has rightly noted that "the operationalization of Bushehr greatly facilitates [the fulfillment] of Iran's nuclear rights and the procurement of peaceful nuclear technology".

The fact that Bushehr is now more than seven years behind schedule translates into serious worries about the future of Iran's power industry. Iran is in dire need of nuclear-generated electricity and the crisis over Bushehr directly translates into a crisis of economic planning in Iran. [1] The Russian leadership must realize the extent of damage to Iran, both short-term and long-term, caused by their toying with Bushehr for the sake of their US policy.

"Iran expects its friends to prevent the denial of Iran's legitimate rights," Iran's former president Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has complained, and more bitter reactions on the part of other Iranian politicians have been reflected in the Iranian press. A growing number of parliamentarians openly use the word "betrayal" to describe the Kremlin's behavior. The Kremlin's other decision, to offer cooperation with the US in monitoring Iran's missile program through the giant radar stationed in Azerbaijan, has also met criticism by Iranian politicians.

At the same time, there are other points of tension between Russia and Iran, such as their competition for the European energy market. Russia has bitterly complained against the recent Iran-Turkmenistan-Turkey gas deal, which undermines Russia's energy strategy toward Europe, and the Iranian media have made [color]no secret about the implications of this

deal in harming Russia's interests.

As neighbors who share only maritime borders in the Caspian Sea, Russia and Iran are also at odds over the division of the water and its resources. Marathon negotiations among the littoral states over a new legal regime for the Caspian have been deadlocked for many years and, certainly, the worsening political climate due to the nuclear rift will further complicate this matter.

President Vladimir Putin has not hesitated in flexing Russia's naval might in the Caspian to coerce the Iranians on the contested issue of Caspian ownership and, with alarming signs of a full-fledged crisis in Iran-Russia relations, he (and his successor) may be inclined to make more use of that leverage.

A pertinent question is whether or not Russia's still-formidable pool of shared interests with Iran, including the containment of the United States' unipolar hegemony and hopes for a world gas cartel, will act as deterrents against the current deterioration of relations above-mentioned.

After all, Russia's security calculus continues to count on Iran in its global policy, and if Russia is not careful, it may lose what it has taken for granted for a long time, that is, Iran's role in its grand scheme of things. Moscow is clearly not thrilled about the latest news from Baghdad regarding Iran-US talks and the formation of a joint panel on Iraq's security, which portends broader US-Iran security dialogue.

Until now, the Iranians have blamed Washington for obstructing talks over Tehran's nuclear program, and this position has been reiterated by Hassan Rowhani, Iran's former chief negotiator during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, in his latest press interview. Yet that might change in light of alarming signs of Russia's thinly veiled ambiguities on the concrete proposals to resolve the nuclear standoff.

Concerning the latter, Larijani has told the foreign press that the "time-out" proposal by International Atomic Energy Agency chief Mohammad ElBaradei "is not the same as a suspension demand". He is thus hinting that Iran is still seriously considering this proposal as it might be a way around Tehran's steadfast insistence that it will not suspend its nuclear program.

Both Larijani and Rowhani have said that US-Iran dialogue on Iraq can improve the climate over the nuclear talks, with Larijani putting the accent on the need for a "long-term vision" by Western and other governments insisting on a suspension of Iran's nuclear enrichment program.

"They do not say what is the next step. If Iran suspends, then what? Nothing is clear," Larijani has rightly complained. Unfortunately, the US has rejected the offer by Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki for "higher-level" talks between the US and Iran, claiming the time is not ripe. But if the US is really interested in a serious breakthrough in the nuclear row with Iran, it will have to set aside its misgivings and internal bickerings and embrace Mottaki's suggestion. This is in light of Larijani's insistence that Iran "has not rejected" the incentive package that was offered to Iran by the "five plus one" (the United Nations Security Council's permanent five - the US, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom - plus Germany). [2]

In conclusion, it is curious that just as the US and Iran are breaking some significant ice in their long-frozen relations, new ice is gathering around the ship of Iran-Russia diplomacy. That need not be so, and the two issues are not mutually exclusive. However, if Russia persists with its shenanigans over Bushehr, which have soured the prospects for Russia-Iran cooperation on not only nuclear but also a whole array of other, eg regional and security, issues, then there is no alternative to the word "crisis" in describing the overall state of relations between the two countries.

Notes

1. For more on this, see Afrasiabi, et al, [color="#0000ff"]Iran needs nuclear power, International Herald Tribune, October 14, 2003.
2. For more on the incentive package, see Abbas Maleki and Afrasiabi, Iran's diplomacy in action, San Francisco Chronicle, August 25, 2006.

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