



## Bad Business

Civilian Nuclear Cooperation with Moscow.

By Henry Sokolski

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ON Capitol Hill last Friday, cynical Department of Energy bureaucrats quietly let it be known that they would like to finalize a civilian nuclear-cooperative agreement with Russia—while Congress is politically distracted. The deal is of no commercial value to the United States and would clearly favor Russia. It would mindlessly reward Moscow for its outrageous nuclear and rocket assistance to Iran’s mullahs.

What’s worse, the Department of Energy might get its way. How did we get here? Diplomatic posturing.

In a desperate effort to accomplish something “positive” at a July summit, President Bush initialed a nuclear-cooperative agreement with President Putin. Getting to yes with a truculent Moscow, though, required that the deal be one-sided: All of the prospective commercial benefits accrued to Moscow, including making it legal for Russia to temporarily store U.S.-origin spent fuel from European and Asian reactors for \$10 to \$20 billion. Also, the Russians would be able to cooperate on all of America’s most advanced nuclear-reactor programs and be able to test advanced U.S. nuclear fuels. Meanwhile, the commercial prospects for U.S. nuclear fuel and reactor designers selling to Russia were and remain zilch.

The White House, of course, understood how uneven the deal was. That’s one of the reasons why, after initialing it and celebrating how symbolically “cooperative” the United States and Russia were becoming, U.S. officials chose not to put it before Congress for finalization—under current law the agreement will become effective in 90 days, unless legislators pass a law stopping it.

The other reason they held back had to do with Russia’s continued nuclear and rocket assistance to Iran. This week Moscow made its final shipment of nuclear fuel needed to start up a massive power reactor at Bushehr. Once this Iranian plant is up and running for a year, it will produce enough near-weapons grade plutonium for roughly 60 crude nuclear weapons. And then there is the matter of Russia helping Iran develop its growing number of long-range rocket-missiles. These will soon will be able threaten a good part of NATO.

This nuclear and rocket aid continues even as Moscow objects to the United States building a modest missile-defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic to defend against the Iranian threat. Moscow also has refused to limit its conventional-arms sales to Iran, something even the Clinton administration made a point of demanding in the late 1990s as a condition for a U.S.-Russian nuclear-cooperative agreement. Now Moscow is



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selling advanced air defenses to Iran, defenses that could be deployed to defend Iran's nuclear sites.

Reflecting on these Russian misdeeds, the White House rightly figured that Congress would be in no mood to give Moscow a U.S.-nuclear pat on the back. The White House also counted heads: The lower body overwhelming passed a bill last year sponsored by Tom Lantos, the Democratic chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, which prohibited the United States from granting any nuclear cooperation with any country actively assisting Iran's nuclear program—*i.e.*, Russia. Similar legislation has been tabled in the Senate and now has 69 cosponsors.

Backers of the deal at the Energy Department, though, are motivated to test the waters. They are especially anxious now to substitute the U.S.-Russian cooperative nuclear-weapons reduction programs that are nearing completion with a new set of U.S.-Russian civilian nuclear projects, projects that are only permissible if a formal nuclear-cooperative agreement with Russia is put into force. These officials cynically calculate that Congress is too preoccupied with presidential-year politics to step in by the 90-day deadline.

Here, they may not be wrong. The question is whether Congress, especially the Senate, will speak up now and make it clear to the executive branch that this deal is a political non-starter. Making such noise would hardly require courage. Helping Putin hone his country's nuclear capabilities while it continues to help Iran do likewise, after all, is a stunningly bad move.

— *Henry Sokolski is executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center in Washington, D.C., and editor of Falling Behind: International Scrutiny of the Peaceful Atom (U.S. Army War College, forthcoming).*