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Russia and China Inch Toward Iran Sanctions

By HELENE COOPER

PARIS, July 12 — Russia and China, crossing a diplomatic threshold in the effort to curb Tehran's nuclear ambitions, joined the United States and Europe on Wednesday by agreeing to seek a United Nations Security Council resolution ordering Iran to freeze some nuclear activities, or face sanctions.

The movement toward a resolution represented increased anger over Iran's refusal to respond to an offer of economic and energy incentives if it suspended its uranium enrichment.

Though punitive sanctions are in no way certain, agreeing to start down a road that could lead to them is a huge step for Moscow and Beijing, commercial partners of Tehran that have long resisted attempts by the United States and Europe to punish Iran at the United Nations.

For the past five weeks, the biggest question on the incentives, presented to Iran in June, has been whether the fragile coalition of six countries making the offer would pursue sanctions if Iran refused to accept.

After a two-and-a-half-hour meeting of foreign ministers on Wednesday at the ornate Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris, the answer seemed clear — for now at least.

“The Iranians have given no indication at all that they are ready to engage seriously on the substance of our proposals,” Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said in a terse statement on behalf of the group, which includes Germany and Britain. “We express profound disappointment over this situation.”

The group agreed to seek a Security Council resolution that would make suspension of enrichment mandatory. “Should Iran refuse to comply,” the statement added, “then we will work for the adoption of measures” under an article of the United Nations Charter that allows for nonmilitary punitive sanctions.

Bush administration officials characterized the statement as a victory, particularly for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's gamble that she could get China and Russia to proceed on a diplomatic path that could result in sanctions if the United States first made Iran a strong offer of incentives. American and European officials said Iran, by refusing to accept or reject the offer, might have miscalculated its support from Russia and China.

“This is a significant decision that frankly reflects the disappointment and frustration of our countries by the lack of a serious response from the Iranian government,” said R. Nicholas Burns, under secretary of state for political affairs. “Iran has given us no choice.”

That said, it is far from certain whether the unity of the six countries will hold.

Part of the reason American and European negotiators have chosen this moment to issue ultimatums is that the Group of 8 summit meeting is being held this weekend in St. Petersburg, Russia. This is the first time Russia serves as host, and Moscow seems to want to avoid having the talks dominated by the failure of major powers to agree on how to deal with Iran. Once the summit meeting is over, the leverage will be gone.

Indeed, sanctions are still way off. A senior American official said diplomats planned to meet at the United Nations next week to draft a resolution ordering Iran to suspend its enrichment activities, including turning off the fast-spinning centrifuges that enrich uranium.

If Iran does not comply, the group would then seek harsher action. But the statement on Wednesday gave no timetable. The senior American official said Iran would be given “a number of days” to comply.

At the United Nations, John R. Bolton, the American ambassador, said, “Obviously, we will be consulting here beginning this afternoon to carry out the direction that the foreign ministers have given us.”

The group of six nations said it could stop the Security Council action at any time, provided Iran suspended its uranium enrichment. The United States has set the suspension as a condition for holding direct high-level talks with Iran; diplomatic ties were severed when revolutionaries seized the American Embassy in Tehran in 1979.

Before the group issued its statement, Iran’s president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, said Wednesday: “We are willing to negotiate about our nuclear program based on fair principles. If the circumstances are unjust, our people will not back down.”

The six countries agreed on a list of possible sanctions but have not yet decided which ones might be imposed. The list includes travel restrictions on Iranian officials, a ban on cultural exchanges and visas for Iranians, financial restrictions, political sanctions and even an oil embargo, although the latter is seen as highly unlikely and one that could further rattle global markets.

The incentives presented to Iran include access to light-water nuclear reactors, support for Tehran’s entry into the World Trade Organization, lifting a ban on selling aircraft and parts to Iran and other economic measures.

Mr. Ahmadinejad has said that, “God willing,” Iran would respond to the offer by late August. But in a news conference in Brussels on Tuesday, Iran’s top nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, refused to be pinned down to any deadline.

Wednesday’s meeting of foreign ministers brought with it some bickering between Secretary Rice and her Russian counterpart, Sergey V. Lavrov, diplomats said. There was

quick agreement on the text of the statement by deputy ministers, but Mr. Lavrov and Ms. Rice, much as they did two weeks ago in Moscow, criticized each other over other points, including the tactics and timing of the action in the Security Council.

“We had to take into account Russian concerns that we not take steps that would lead Iran to overshadow the G-8,” one European official said.

Russian officials were also concerned that the resolution not eventually lead to military action against Iran.

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