

Russia and West Split on Iran Nuclear Issue

By [ELAINE SCIOLINO](#)

March 7, 2006

New York Times

VIENNA, March 6 — A serious rift emerged Monday when [Russia](#) split with the [United States](#) and Europe over [Iran's](#) nuclear program after the Russians floated a last-minute proposal to allow Iran to make small quantities of nuclear fuel, according to European officials.

The reports of the proposal prompted Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) to call [Mohamed ElBaradei](#), the director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and according to an administration official who was briefed on the conversation, "she said the United States cannot support this."

Ms. Rice's call came after Dr. ElBaradei suggested to reporters that the standoff with Iran could be resolved in a week or so, apparently an allusion to the Russian proposal. Washington's strategy is to get past the meeting of the I.A.E.A. that opened Monday and, under a resolution passed by the agency's board in February, have the issue turned over to the [United Nations](#) Security Council immediately. But officials clearly fear that the Russian proposal is intended to slow that process.

American officials said they had been assured by the Russians that there was no formal proposal on the table. The Russian foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, had dinner in Washington on Monday evening with Ms. Rice and the national security adviser, Stephen Hadley, and he is scheduled to meet President Bush in the Oval Office on Tuesday.

Under the Russian proposal, Iran would temporarily suspend all uranium enrichment activities at its facility at Natanz but then be allowed to do what Russia describes as "limited research activities" in Iran's uranium enrichment program, said the European officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity under normal diplomatic rules.

Iran would have to agree to a moratorium on production of enriched uranium on an industrial scale for between seven to nine years, ratify additional measures that let the nuclear agency conduct intrusive inspections of its nuclear facilities and create a joint venture with Russia on the production of enriched uranium on Russian soil, the officials said. The proposal, which has not been made public, spurred Dr. ElBaradei to give an upbeat assessment about a possible swift resolution of the impasse over Iran's program, an official familiar with his thinking said.

In a tonal shift, Dr. ElBaradei said Iran had made concessions on some issues. Calling Iran's activities at its uranium enrichment plant at Natanz "the sticking point," he added, "That issue is still being discussed this week, and I still hope that in the next week or so that agreement could still be reached."

In an interview on Monday evening, R. Nicholas Burns, the under secretary of state for political affairs, said the administration would reject any proposal that did not require the Iranians to stop domestic nuclear enrichment and reprocessing activities. "The United States will not support any

halfway measures," he said. "That means full suspension of all nuclear activities, and a return to negotiations on that basis."

Ms. Rice told Dr. ElBaradei that Washington wanted to see Iran's case before the Security Council as soon as this week's agency board meeting was over; that the United States would seek a presidential statement, which does not carry the weight of a resolution, noting Iran's past failures to comply with its international commitments; and that Iran's case would then be sent back to the nuclear agency for further review, according to an official with knowledge of the conversation.

The Russian proposal is a reversal of its previous stance and seemed motivated by its determination to protect Iran from judgment by the Security Council.

Russia — and even China — had joined the United States and the Europeans in demanding that Iran resume a freeze of uranium enrichment activities at Natanz, reflecting mounting global suspicion that Iran's nuclear program is intended to produce weapons.

The Russian proposal surfaced late last week, when Sergei Kisliak, Russia's chief nuclear negotiator, presented it to officials of Britain, France and Germany.

He said Iran would have to resume full suspension of all enrichment-related activities, including what it calls its small-scale "research and development" while the agreement on the package was negotiated. Once there was an agreement, however, Iran would be allowed to conduct limited uranium enrichment research activities under a pilot program as agreed with the I.A.E.A.

As soon as Iran and the agency agreed on the small-scale enrichment, Iran's Parliament would ratify the "Additional Protocol" to Iran's nuclear agreement. That protocol gives the nuclear agency's inspectors the right to ask for exceptional access to Iran's nuclear facilities. When one of the Europeans asked Mr. Kisliak for his definition of a pilot program, he said there was no real definition, one official said.

A moratorium on industrial-scale enrichment and reprocessing activities would last two to three years while the nuclear agency carried out an investigation of Iran's past nuclear activities and five to six years more until trust with Iran could be rebuilt.

Mr. Kisliak conceded that a major risk of such a package was that Iran would inch closer to mastering the technology for a small cascade of centrifuges that turn uranium gas into enriched uranium that can be used to produce electricity or to make bombs. He added that it would shorten the period needed for Iran to "manufacture a weapon" by a number of months, one official familiar with the briefing said.

Iran has always contended its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, although Russia, like the United States and the Europeans, is convinced it intends to make nuclear weapons.

Mr. Kisliak speculated that Iran was unlikely to accept the proposal, in part because of the long-term constraints on its industrial-scale enrichment program. The proposal threatened to derail a

carefully formulated, but fragile strategy to send Iran's case to the Security Council. Last month's resolution by the nuclear agency board demanded that no action be taken in the Council until after the current board meeting, a way to give Iran one last chance to comply with agency demands.

Even though there is no specific timetable to seek economic sanctions on Iran, both Russia and China are opposed to sanctions. There is no need for another resolution to be passed by the agency board this time for the Security Council to act. Certainly, Dr. ElBaradei is looking for a negotiated solution to the Iran impasse even if it means giving Iran a significant concession on making nuclear fuel.

In a conversation with the German and French foreign ministers, a senior British Foreign Office envoy and the [European Union's](#) foreign policy chief, [Javier Solana](#), in Vienna last Friday, Dr. ElBaradei expressed the view that Iran needed to continue some uranium enrichment work as a face-saving measure, a European official said. The Europeans, who met earlier with Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, replied that it was not a question of saving face but of maintaining both the credibility of the nuclear agency and a firm position toward Iran.

The crucial issue for Iran is mastering the fuel cycle by enriching uranium. Indeed, in Tehran on Sunday, Mr. Larijani reiterated Iran's position that it would not freeze small-scale production of nuclear fuel even if its case came before the Security Council.

David E. Sanger contributed reporting from Washington for this article.

Copyright 2006 The New York Times Co.