

Defanging Iran Could Solidify U.S.-Russia Ties

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Articles & Testimony

There is a rub-your-eyes quality to the summit that kicks off tonight between President Bush and Russian leader Vladimir V. Putin in Russia. Erstwhile enemies are embarking on a historic new partnership. If they seize the moment, they could parlay their new friendship into solving a problem that has eluded them thus far: the defanging of Iran.

It is hard to escape the view that the traditional rivals are fundamentally refining their relationship and a U.S.-Russia entente is in full bloom.

Though the Cold War ended more than a decade ago, it took the tragedy of Sept. 11 to force the realization that these two former enemies must work together closely to combat the forces of extremism. The old mentality of the Cold War lives among many who promote the spread of Russian nuclear technology to Iran. But membership in the West has its obligations, namely responsible international behavior. Secretary of State Colin L. Powell calls the effort to halt the Russian flow of nuclear technology to Iran a top foreign policy objective of the U.S. and those seeking to curb radicalism.

Yevgeny Primakov is a "Cold Warrior" who for decades was one of Russia's leading Middle East strategists and recently was the country's prime minister. Strobe Talbott, the Clinton administration's point man in dealing with Russia, viewed Primakov as an obstructionist when it came to ties with Iran.

Talbott writes in "The Russia Hand," his just-released memoirs on his time in office, that "Primakov's view [was] that U.S.-Russia relations were essentially and eternally a zero-sum game." In other words, if the U.S. is upset with Iran, Primakov must believe it is in Russia's interest to foster closer ties with Tehran.

Indeed, the U.S. has many reasons to be suspicious of Iran. A Jan. 30 CIA report to Congress concludes: "Iran remains one of the most active countries seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction -- indicating its desire to develop a domestic capability to produce various types of chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and their delivery systems."

Despite the efforts of reformers, hard-liners dominate Iran, and now Tehran is working on a medium-range missile and is moving toward a long-range missile that could hit the U.S. Can anyone doubt that a "nuclearized" Iran means the power struggle there will be tipped further in the direction of the mullahs and away from the moderates?

Moreover, a nuclear-armed Iran is bound to make the Middle East an even less stable place, as evidenced by Iranian mischief-making throughout the region. If Iran gets a nuclear bomb and this is equated with regional primacy, what will be the effect on Arab countries such as Egypt -- always super-sensitive to its position in the region?

Moreover, one cannot assume that Iran wants to go nuclear merely for reasons of prestige. Former Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani openly boasted in a sermon a few months ago that once Iran got nuclear weapons it would be able to wipe out Israel.

Taken altogether, Tehran's behavior has earned it a place among three states that Bush called the "axis of evil."

The Primakov approach is rendered antiquated by not only the fact that the countries are no longer locked for advantage in a global chessboard but because Russia also is worried by the brand of Islamic radicalism Iran represents.

There is another reason why Russia sells nuclear technology to Iran in spite of its worries: a desire to make a fast buck. Talbott says the U.S. has incontrovertible evidence that such technology transfer has been orchestrated by successive Russian ministers of atomic affairs. According to Talbott, Al Gore, a key figure in U.S.-Russia relations when he was vice president, told Primakov a few years ago that Russia was being at best penny-wise and pound-foolish since its attitude toward Tehran meant it was forgoing billions of dollars in revenue from the commercial launching of satellites and other deals with the West.

"You can have a piddling trickle of money from Iran or a bonanza with us," Gore reportedly said, "but you can't have both. Why do you keep trying to have it both ways?"

Whether dealing with outdated ideas of Cold War geopolitics or driven by financial gain, Russia's approach to Iran is deeply misguided.

A joint Bush-Putin approach on the issue of nuclear technology and Iran this week would be the best evidence that this new partnership holds promise not just for the start of a beautiful bilateral relationship but also in demonstrating key resolve in dealing with the roughest neighborhood in the world today -- the Middle East. ❖

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