

Patrushev Will Seek to Revive Iran Talks

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TEHRAN, Iran — Russia will look to revive nuclear talks between Iran and the world's biggest economic and military powers this week, hoping that its special relationship with Tehran can help jolt back to life negotiations that some analysts consider "dead in the water."

Security Council chief Nikolai Patrushev will meet his Iranian counterpart and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in Tehran on Monday and is expected to raise a Russian plan to restart the talks that collapsed in January.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told U.S. President Barack Obama in July of Moscow's "step-by-step" approach under which Iran could address questions about its nuclear program and be rewarded with a gradual easing of sanctions imposed by countries that fear Tehran is seeking nuclear weapons, a charge it denies.

With Israel and Washington both keeping open the possibility of launching pre-emptive strikes on Iran to prevent it from getting nuclear weapons, the negotiations are a possible way of avoiding what analysts say would be highly risky military action.

But few analysts expect a breakthrough after the failure of the last talks between Iran and the

five permanent members of the UN Security Council, the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France, plus Germany (known as the EU3+3 or P5+1), in Istanbul in January.

Russia backed a fourth round of UN sanctions against Tehran in June 2010 but has criticized tighter measures imposed unilaterally by the United States and the European Union and emphasized its opposition to military action.

So Tehran might be more receptive to an approach from Moscow than one from the West — the EU3+3's delegation is led by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton.

"It's certainly easier for Iran to respond to a Russian gambit than to Western pressure. The EU3+3 negotiating efforts with Iran are stuck dead in the water," said Mark Fitzpatrick, a nonproliferation expert at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies. "If Russia's plan can get Iran to the negotiating table, then great. Talks have to start somehow."

Not only is Moscow not part of the Western alliance Iran sees as its greatest enemy, but it is also involved in developing part of the Islamic republic's nuclear program as builder of its first nuclear power plant at Bushehr on the Gulf coast.

"Russia has maintained a long-standing relationship with Iran, effectively it is a partner in Iran's nuclear program through its construction of the Bushehr nuclear plant, and has never shown the slightest ambition of changing the government of Iran," said Farideh Farhi, an Iran expert at the University of Hawaii.

But, Farhi said, the "step-by-step" approach mentioned by Lavrov did not appear to be substantively new, and it looked less, not more, likely to work that it had before.

"Tying Iran's step-by-step moves to reduction of sanctions is something that has not worked, and it works even less now that so many sanctions against Iran are unilateral sanctions imposed by the U.S. Congress and cannot be negotiated by representatives of executive branches in both countries," he said.

While Ahmadinejad maintains that the sanctions are having no impact, other officials have started admitting that some of the measures — particularly ones that restrict Iran's access to foreign banks — are hurting the economy.

Any new talks are likely to focus on concerns about Iran's nuclear enrichment, which a UN Security Council resolution requires it to stop but which Tehran says it is entitled to do as a member of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.

Iran denies seeking nuclear weapons and says it is enriching uranium for electricity production and medical applications.

But its decision last year to raise the level of enrichment from the 3.5 percent purity needed for normal power plant fuel to 20 percent worried countries that saw it as a significant step toward the 90 percent needed for bombs.

Far from reducing its uranium enrichment program, Tehran has stepped it up, announcing in June that it would triple its production capacity of higher-grade fuel and shift that work to an underground bunker that would be less vulnerable to a military strike.

"Iran will try to persuade Russia and China to accept its precondition of accepting its right to enrichment before sitting down at the table," Fitzpatrick said. "Russia and China don't see eye-to-eye with the U.S. and the Europeans, and ... Iran will seek to exploit the differences."

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