

Moscow Slams U.S. Sanctions On Iran

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Russia on Tuesday dismissed new U.S. sanctions targeting Iran's financial and energy sectors as "unacceptable" and said they would damage any chances of renewing negotiations with Tehran over its nuclear program.

A sharply worded Russian statement underscored Moscow's longstanding opposition to sanctions beyond those endorsed by the United Nations Security Council, where Russia holds veto power as a permanent member. The council has passed four packages of limited sanctions against Iran since 2006.

"We again underline that the Russian Federation considers such extraterritorial measures unacceptable and contradictory to international law," Foreign Ministry spokesman Alexander Lukashevich said in the statement.

It indicated that despite big powers having united to push through a U.N. nuclear agency board resolution last week that expressed increasing concern about Iran's nuclear program, Russia continues to differ sharply with the West on how to win Tehran's cooperation.

"Such practices ... seriously complicate efforts for constructive dialogue with Tehran,"

Lukashevich said.

Analysts say Moscow sees less risk than the West of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons in the foreseeable future, and uses its ties with Tehran as a lever in relations with the United States, its former Cold War foe.

Russia has approved four sets of Security Council sanctions over Iran's nuclear program, most recently in 2010, when President Dmitry Medvedev also pleased Washington by scrapping a contract to sell Tehran ground-to-air missiles.

Those moves came at a time of "resetting" relations between Russia and the United States.

Now, however, with talks on missile defense cooperation with Washington at an impasse, and the possibility that a Republican critic of Russia could be elected U.S. president in 2012, Moscow appears to see little gain from supporting new Iran sanctions.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who plans to return to Russia's presidency in a March election, has expressed less concern over Iran's nuclear ambitions than Medvedev.

Russia has underlined its opposition to further sanctions and is calling instead for a step-by-step process under which existing sanctions would be eased in return for actions by Tehran to dispel international concerns.

"Strengthening sanctions pressure, which for some of our partners is becoming practically an end in itself, will not promote increased readiness on Iran's part to sit down at the negotiating table," Lukashevich said.

Russia has joined the United States and Britain in backing Israel's view that the Middle East cannot be turned into a zone free of nuclear arms without progress on peace in the region.

The three nations told a meeting on the issue Tuesday that such zones "do not exist in isolation from other security factors," The Associated Press reported.

That dovetails with Israel's view that peace must prevail in the Middle East before it can be made into a nuclear-free zone. But it clashes with the Arab position that the two issues are separate. The Arabs say Israel's undeclared nuclear arsenal is the biggest threat to Mideast peace.

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