

U.S. / Russia Nuclear Deal

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Committee

This Thursday a House committee will take the first step in signaling where Congress stands on a pending nuclear energy agreement with Russia. The hearing represents a critical opportunity for the United States to make progress on limiting the threat posed by nuclear weapons. Ratification of the agreement should come with a commitment to further joint action on dealing with Iran's nuclear program and as well as a commitment to developing a post-START agreement that codifies deeper nuclear reductions. Ratification of the nuclear cooperation agreement should signal to the new Russian President and the next American President that the American people require broader leadership on the part of both governments regarding reducing the threat posed by weapons of mass destruction.

On
May 12, President Bush submitted to Congress the text of a proposed agreement on peaceful nuclear cooperation between the United States and Russia. The agreement would provide Russia with access to U.S. nuclear technologies and markets and the right to receive U.S. origin nuclear materials into Russia for storage or processing. While the agreement is not necessary to do so, it could also give impetus for the U.S. and Russia to collaborate on providing nuclear fuel cycle services to non-nuclear states that are searching for solutions to their demand for energy.

Referred to by shorthand as a "123 agreement," after the section of the 1954 Atomic Energy Act this agreement will become law if Congress does not act to amend or reject. Because of the curious timing of the Bush administration's submission, the agreement will only have reached the 76th legislative day of consideration when Congress adjourns on September 26th, letting its fate fall to a new administration and Congress if the current Congress so chooses.

I strongly believe that we should not let the clock run out and punt a decision this important. Instead we must seize this opportunity to make progress on several critical related issues. With North Korea's recent declaration of its plutonium, one of the greatest threats to global security is showing signs of resolution, leaving two significant challenges for both Russia and the United States: Ahmadinejad quest for nuclear weapons and the still oversized American and Russian arsenals at risk of theft and accidental launch.

The prospect of an Iran armed with nuclear weapons continues to be one of the greatest threats to the United States and to its allies. Despite assurances contained in the Nuclear Proliferation Assessment that accompanied submission of the 123 document that the United States has "received assurances from Russia...that its government would not tolerate cooperation with Iran in violation of its U.N. Security Council Resolutions," Russia continues to build a nuclear power plant at

Bushehr and thwarts harsher international sanctions against Iran. Arms control experts warn that Russia remains actively engaged in missile, nuclear, and advanced conventional defense cooperation with Iran. Underpinning Russia's security cooperation with Iran is Moscow's commercial interest in staying involved in a country with the world's second largest reserves of gas and third largest oil supply.

While the incentives for changed Russian behavior are hard to identify in the current climate, it is critical that Russia agree to cease nuclear cooperation with Iran including construction of Bushehr. At a time of record windfall oil profits for Russia, abstaining from supporting Iran's nuclear program is a small price to pay for a more stable region.

Of equal concern is the loss of the last major arms control agreement of the 21st Century when the START agreement expires in December 2009. START contains the transparency and verification protocols on which the Moscow Treaty relies. As the United States and Russia reduce the number of deployed nuclear weapons, pursuant to the Moscow Treaty, these rules are crucial. When START lapses the United States will lose any ability to verify that Russia is effectively reducing its arsenal.

The United States and Russia must negotiate a legally binding replacement to START. Only through such an agreement can we ease Russian concern that the United States is seeking a strategic advantage and begin to negotiate openly and clearly.

The 123 agreement complies with all arms control criteria listed in the Atomic Energy Act; so it does not threaten non-proliferation standards and will in the short term, likely only offer limited commercial benefit to US firms. Instead, what it does is put the United States and Russia back on a path of serious cooperation, addressing the threat of weapons of mass destruction, the most serious issue the international community faces.