

US places Iran center stage of shield row

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The US has reportedly offered to shelve its missile defense shield in Europe if Russia withdraws its support for Iran's nuclear program.

Russian daily Kommersant cited White House sources as saying on Monday that President Barack Obama has made a proposal to his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev asking to change position on Iran in exchange for a halt to the US missile shield plan.

The report comes as plans for the installation of anti ballistic missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic have contributed to the deterioration of White House-Kremlin relations over the past few years.

The missile shield plan has rankled Moscow, as it sees the system as a threat to its national security. President Obama has addressed the Russian concern by saying that he wants to press the "reset button" and build better relations with Moscow.

According to Kommersant, since President Obama has been sworn into office in January the American and Russian presidents have only exchanged letters and had one telephone conversation.

The controversial defense shield is expected to be discussed when President Obama and Medvedev meet on April 2 on the sidelines of the G20 summit in London.

In a Sunday interview, President Medvedev said he expected the new US administration to display a "more creative approach" to the issue than that of its predecessors.

"We have received signals from our American colleagues," Medvedev said. "I expect those signals will turn into specific proposals. I hope to discuss the issue, which is extremely important for Europe, with US President Barack Obama."

Russia's foreign minister Sergei Lavrov warned earlier that Moscow would be forced to position its missiles on the European Union border if the components of the long-disputed US missile defense were deployed in Central Europe.

The report of secret Moscow-Washington negotiations on Iran comes as earlier in February, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said a final decision on the deployment of a missile-tracking radar in the Czech Republic and interceptor rockets in Poland hinged in part on Iran's stance regarding its nuclear program.

"This is one of those issues that really will rest with the decisions made by the Iranian government," Clinton said on February 10.

The letter by President Obama to his Russian counterpart is believed to be the United States' most explicit statement linking the missile shield to Russia's cooperation with Iran over its nuclear program.

The White House under former President George W. Bush said the missile defense shield is necessary to counter a threat posed by "rogue states", such as Iran.

Russia, however, says it will not be taken in by the "missile threat" excuse.

"No sensible person believes in fairy tales about the Iranian missile threat, and that thousands of kilometers from Tehran on the coast of the Baltic Sea, it is necessary to station a missile interceptor system," Russia's NATO envoy Dmitry Rogozin said in November 2008.

The US, Israel and their European allies — Britain, France and Germany — claim that Iran is developing a military nuclear program.

Tehran, however, denies the charge that it is seeking to build a bomb and argues that the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) - to which it is a signatory - allows for a domestic, civilian nuclear industry.

Earlier in an interview with RIA Novosti, Iran's Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki suggested that the West had launched a misinformation campaign against the Iranian nuclear program to force an end to Russia's nuclear presence in Iran for competitive reasons.

"Certain powers have sought to question the nature of Tehran-Moscow nuclear cooperation. It should be noted that their objective is to vie with Russia for Iran's nuclear market," Mottaki said in early February.

After the first Iranian nuclear power plant in Bushehr, which Russia has been constructing for Iran since 1995, was pre-commissioned last week, the opponents of Iran's nuclear program expressed concern over the country's latest nuclear achievement.

Addressing Western concerns, Head of the Rosatom State Atomic Corporation Sergei Kiriyenko said, "We believe that the structure in the Bushehr plant itself is in total conformity with the Non-Proliferation."

"Anyone who thinks this project can be used for the proliferation of nuclear weapons can come here and see for themselves."

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