

You are currently viewing the printable version of this article, to return to the normal page, please [click here](#).

# The Washington Times

- [Politics](#)
- [National](#)
- [World](#)
- [National Security](#)
- [Economy](#)
- [D.C. Local](#)
- [Inside the Beltway](#)
- [Inside the Ring](#)
- [Pruden on Politics](#)

## SOKOLSKI: From Russia with disdain

[5 Comments and 0 Reactions](#) | [Share](#) [Tweet](#) | [Email](#) | [Print](#) |

0 [Like](#)

By

-

The Washington Times

Thursday, November 19, 2009



### OPINION/ANALYSIS:

In Washington, it's almost impossible to underestimate how blase officials can become about the most hair-raising news if it involves an entity they believe the U.S. must do business with. Consider Capitol Hill and executive-branch reaction to news of continued Russian assistance to Iran's nuclear weapons program. Rather than open a debate about what Moscow is up to, most officials have been in one or another form of denial. This is a mistake. In fact, the latest evidence suggests Russia is trying to play both us and Iran.

Earlier this month, leaked International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) documents revealed that Tehran has been working on a nuclear warhead design that is far smaller, lighter and more advanced than anything previously suspected. Unlike the complicated, first-generation nuclear weapons design China shared with Pakistan and that Pakistani nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan, in turn, shared with Libya, this model uses only two shaped chemical explosive charges (instead of the 32 used in first-generation designs) to compress and set off a relatively narrow football-shaped core of nuclear weapons fuel — i.e., plutonium or highly enriched uranium. This "two-point detonation" warhead, which only the most advanced nuclear weapons states have mastered, is small and light enough to enable Iran's latest rocket systems to target NATO's southeastern members. With further range improvements, which are expected before 2015, Iran could target most of Europe.

Where did Iran get this technology? The Guardian reporter that broke the story points to Russia. As he notes, the IAEA has been trying to get Iran to turn over state's evidence about a Russian nuclear weapons implosion expert's visit there several years ago. The agency's concern here, though, is not just historical. In late September, Israeli and British papers revealed that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu flew to Moscow and personally handed Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin a highly classified list of specific Russian scientists that the Israelis believe are still helping Iran's nuclear weapons program.

Given the political imperative to stop Iran from getting the bomb, you'd think these reports would knock most

officials back on their heels. Yet, when asked about them, most U.S. officials are reticent. The IAEA documents, they note, only covered developments through 2004. They have not seen the Israeli list. Finally, even if true, it is unlikely, they say, that the Russian government was knowingly involved.

Yet, when pressed that Russia had to know of the movement of its own weapons experts — a point Mr. Netanyahu is reported to have made to Mr. Putin — some officials open up: Of course, they are concerned, they confide, but their hands are tied since we must cooperate with Russia.

Perhaps, but to what extent?

In March 2008, the Bush administration filed an assessment of Russian nuclear proliferation activities with Congress. This was done as part of President Bush's submission of a proposed U.S.-Russian civilian nuclear cooperative agreement. The unclassified version of the assessment gave Russia a clean bill of health. Yet, a year later, outside experts noted that Russians have been helping Iran complete a heavy water reactor at Arak that is optimized to make weapons usable plutonium.

In addition, there apparently was something in the classified Bush proliferation assessment concerning Iran that did not sit well with key Capitol Hill staff. After looking at available evidence, the House Committee on Energy and Commerce and its subcommittee on oversight and investigations demanded that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) examine the report to see if the administration pulled its punch. The GAO's public findings (the GAO also did a classified report) were hardly reassuring: The administration's vetting with the intelligence community, it noted, was "rushed" and "incomplete."

Finally, there is the Russian-Iranian rocket connection. The nuclear warhead Iran is developing is tailored for rocket delivery. The rockets, meanwhile, have been developed with Russian assistance. How do we know? The U.S. Director of National Intelligence said so in a letter to Congress in March 2007. But there is an even more recent official confirmation.

Under U.S. law, the president of the United States must certify that Russia is not assisting Iran's development of long-range rockets before he asked Congress for money to pay Moscow for its assistance to the space station project. Last year, Mr. Bush felt uncomfortable about doing this. He asked Congress for a five-year waiver. It appears he got it none too soon: A month after Mr. Bush left office, Iran tested a "peaceful" space launch vehicle. Its first stage was nearly identical to Russia's SS-4 military system. Notwithstanding what assistance Iran may have gotten from others (including North Korea), there is cause, then, to worry that Russians may still be helping out.

Why would Moscow want to do this? In our diplomats' eyes, Russia is to Iran's nuclear missile programs what China is to North Korea's — the indispensable player that Washington must woo. Could it be that Moscow sees an advantage in being in such a position? If we were serious about working with Russia to block Iran from getting the bomb, we should want to find out and even debate the matter publicly. Making that happen, however, would require us to subordinate our desire to finalize more cooperative and nuclear arms agreements with Moscow. For most in Washington, that's one idea that's still off the table.

• *Henry Sokolski is the executive director of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center in Washington and serves on the Congressional Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism.*

Adapted by Google

Russia

Russia in Russia

Nuclear

Russia Photo Rating

Like Moscow Russia