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Russia tries to regain the initiative in the Iran crisis

On 16 August, the secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev visited Tehran, and the next day Ali Akbar Salehi, the Foreign Minister of Iran, visited Moscow. The main topic of conversation was Russia's new proposal to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis, the so-called Lavrov plan. The Russian minister suggested taking gradual steps; in exchange for Iran's progress in cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the international community would freeze the sanctions it has imposed on Iran. In contrast to the Western countries (especially the United States), which are determined to force Iran to give up its uranium enrichment programme, the Russian proposal does not contain any such condition, and in practice it constitutes an attempt to partially legitimise Iran's nuclear programme. As long as the West's position does not change, the Russian initiative is unlikely to succeed.

The impasse in the Iranian crisis has lasted since January 2011, when Iran broke off talks with the so-called 'Six' (the permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany). On one hand, the sanctions introduced by the UNSC in 2010 and the unilateral sanctions by Western states have begun to bear fruit – Iran's international isolation and economic difficulties are deepening. On the other, Tehran is expanding its uranium enrichment programme, which is the main bone of contention.

Through the Lavrov plan, Moscow is seeking to regain the initiative in both the Iranian crisis (after approving the latest sanctions, the need for Moscow and the West to cooperate on this issue has shrunk rapidly), and to improve its relations with Tehran, which were strained by Russia's cancelling its contract to supply anti-missile S-300 systems to Iran, among other reasons. <MaK>