

## **Iran tests Russia-China diplomacy**

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Facing a fast-changing dilemma this week over Iran's nuclear ambitions, China and Russia appear to be trying to have it both ways - backing a new US-led round of sanctions on Iran but also supporting the fuel swap deal brokered by Brazil and Turkey.

By supporting the draft resolution presented on Tuesday for new sanctions, Beijing and Moscow have shown they do not want to openly oppose one of the Obama administration's main diplomatic priorities.

Yet they are also working hard to minimise the potential damage to their relations with Iran - by weakening the proposed sanctions - and to avoid alienating Brazil and Turkey.

The rapid turn of events surprised many analysts. After Iran announced on Monday the revived fuel swap deal with Brazil and Turkey, it was widely assumed that China and Russia, long sceptical about more sanctions on Iran, would use it as a pretext to slow the debate in the UN.

Instead, US officials were able to announce on Tuesday that a draft resolution had the backing of Beijing and Moscow .

While the US is trying to increase pressure on Iran, China is more conciliatory. "We think the introduction of the draft resolution represents an opportunity. It is our hope that all the parties concerned can grasp the opportunity to work for a proper solution through diplomacy," said Li Baodong, China's UN ambassador. The fuel swap deal, he added, was "a positive step in the right direction".

Russia, which has defended Iran against US accusations that it was developing an atomic bomb, appeared resigned to the prospect of new sanctions.

Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian president, welcomed the fuel swap agreement, but said it would not prevent Iran enriching uranium. He called for "urgent consultations with all interested parties, including Iran, to decide what we should do next".

Speaking in Washington after talks at the Pentagon on Tuesday, Sergei Ivanov, Russia's first deputy prime minister, said he "would not be surprised" if the UN adopted a resolution on new sanctions against Iran soon. However, he warned that Russia was drawing a "red line", insisting sanctions would not be "suffocating" or affect ordinary Iranians.

Russia has far more to lose from agreeing to sanctions than the US, which has no economic interest in Iran. "We have a completely different position. We have a trading relationship, and the potential to develop it. We have energy interests, human interests and tourism," said Mr Ivanov.

Ultimately, months of US pressure appears to have produced results. "My guess is that China's interests in not disturbing its relationship with the US are more important than the prospect of doing some kind of damage to its ties with Iran," said Willem van Kemenade, a Beijing-based scholar at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations.

Alexei Malashenko, geopolitical expert at the Moscow Carnegie Center, said the endorsement of UN sanctions against Iran would involve "painful sacrifices" for Russia that would only partly be offset by the prospect of improved relations with the US.

"As usual, Russia is playing a big game," he said. "Russia wants two [conflicting] things, to be with the US and to keep its cherished independent position as a mediator in Iran and the Middle East."

**Fonte: Financial Times, London, May 20<sup>th</sup> 2010, UK, online.**

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