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White House Set to Put Aside U.S.-Russia Nuclear Agreement

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The White House plans to formally pull from congressional consideration an agreement with Russia for civilian nuclear cooperation, perhaps as soon as today, Bush administration sources said over the weekend.

The move would be the latest effort by the administration to convey its displeasure with Russia over its military actions in Georgia in the past month. Last week, the White House proposed a \$1 billion package of humanitarian and economic assistance to help Georgia recover from its war with Russia over the breakaway region of South Ossetia.

Days later, Vice President Cheney traveled to Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, to pledge U.S. support and, at a conference in Italy on Saturday, blasted Moscow over its invasion of Georgian territory, saying, "Russia's actions are an affront to civilized standards and are completely unacceptable."

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice hinted at coming action on the nuclear accord while traveling in North Africa. "The time isn't right for the Russia agreement," she told reporters Saturday. "We'll be making an announcement about that later."

The civil nuclear agreement was signed in Moscow four months ago, after two years of negotiations. Among other things, the deal would facilitate joint ventures between the Russian and U.S. nuclear industries, and would clear the way for Russia to import thousands of tons of spent nuclear fuel, a business potentially worth billions of dollars.

But the accord must be approved by Congress, a step widely seen as impossible after the Georgia-Russia war, according to administration officials and experts on Russia. Withdrawing the agreement from Congress avoids a rejection of the pact, allowing the White House to save the deal for the next administration, should relations with Russia improve, some experts said.

Stephen Sestanovich, a Columbia University professor who handled Russian affairs in the Clinton administration, yesterday said the agreement is "dead in this Congress, but a new administration will have a look."

"Even if this is only a de facto sanction, the Russians have to ask themselves, is this a part of a negative reaction to what they have done that is only going to get bigger if they don't retreat," Sestanovich said. "So far the European Union has actually been a little stiffer and more angry than the Russians truly expected."

Robert J. Einhorn, a specialist on nuclear nonproliferation at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, expressed doubt that withdrawing the nuclear accord would provide much leverage with Moscow, noting that the deal is as much in Washington's interest as Russia's. He said the deal would make it easier for the countries to cooperate in fighting nuclear proliferation and in keeping nuclear material out of the hands of terrorists, both top priorities for the Bush administration.

"The Russians would like this agreement, but they are not dying to get it," Einhorn said yesterday. "They are prepared to live without it. The benefits fall just about equally to both sides. This is not a big favor we have done for the Russians, and so this is not a great punishment to deny it to them."