

The Putin Touch

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Mr. Putin's message to Condoleezza Rice and Bob Gates: "Of course, we can some time in the future decide that some anti-missile defense should be established somewhere on the moon," said Mr. Putin, with more sarcasm than wit.



Go home, Condi!

Vladimir Putin paid Mahmoud Ahmadinejad a visit yesterday, the first Russian leader to hit Tehran since Joseph Stalin in 1943. But let's not get too carried away by the comparison.

More telling was the contrast, in both substance and atmospherics, between the Russian president's meeting with his Iranian counterpart and his talks this past weekend with the U.S. Secretaries of State and Defense. In Iran, Mr. Putin pledged that he would not "renounce our obligations" regarding a nuclear power plant Russia is building in the Iranian port city of Bushehr. He insisted that Iran's "main objectives" in seeking nuclear technology "are peaceful." And he underscored Russia's burgeoning economic ties with the Islamic Republic, which "has already reached \$2 billion."

Anyone harboring illusions that Russia can be brought aboard for a tougher round of U.N. sanctions against Iran might want to read these statements twice. Similarly, anyone who thought Russia could be won over to the deployment of a limited U.S. missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic should have paid closer attention to Mr. Putin's message to Condoleezza Rice and Bob Gates: "Of course, we can some time in the future decide that some anti-missile defense should be established somewhere on the moon," said Mr. Putin, with more sarcasm than wit. He offered this observation after keeping his American guests cooling their heels for 40 minutes, a tactic that recalls the habits of the late Syrian strongman Hafez Assad.

Mr. Putin's claim that the deployment of 10 interceptors poses a threat to his country's nuclear deterrence is almost as preposterous as his claim that Iran's nuclear program poses no threat. Or rather, it would be preposterous if his opposition to this modest U.S. defense initiative wasn't Mr. Putin's entire point. In his smiles yesterday with Mr. Ahmadinejad, as in his scowling at Ms. Rice and Mr. Gates, one sees the future of Russian foreign policy -- and it is beginning to look a lot like its 20th-century past.

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