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US, Russia clash over startup of Iran nuke plant

By ROBERT BURNSAP National Security Writer

The Associated Press

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MOSCOW - U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and her Russian counterpart clashed openly Thursday over the planned launch this summer of Iran's first, Russian-built nuclear power plant, highlighting a split in views over how to steer Iran away from nuclear weapons.

Clinton did not criticize the long-delayed project directly but said the Obama administration is opposed to the timing of the nuclear plant's startup. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced the summer startup plans on Thursday, shortly after Clinton arrived for a two-day visit.

The nuclear plant is an example of Russian-Iranian economic ties and technical cooperation, on terms that have long made the United States uncomfortable. It was a background issue during a difficult period in U.S.-Russian relations last year and in the ongoing U.S.-led effort to bring new United Nations economic penalties against Iran over suspicions that part of its nuclear program is aimed at building a bomb.

Putin's announcement adds another complication to the already long list of issues on which Clinton and her Russian hosts don't agree. Clinton is seeing Putin on Friday.

At a news conference with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov after talks on a wide range of issues, Clinton told reporters that Iran, while entitled to the peaceful use of nuclear energy, must reassure the world that it is not trying to build a nuclear weapon.

"In the absence of those reassurances, we think it would be premature to go forward with any project at this time, because we want to send an unequivocal

message to the Iranians," she said.

Lavrov forcefully asserted that, whatever the U.S. concerns, his country will finish its work on the Bushehr nuclear power plant shortly.

"The project will be completed," Lavrov said. "We are now in the final stage, and this nuclear power plant will be launched. It will be put into operation, it will be functioning, producing power." He added that the plant will operate under strict compliance with requirements of the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog agency.

Lavrov and Clinton also asserted to reporters that U.S.-Russian negotiations on a new treaty to reduce long-range nuclear weapons are close to completion. The accord would replace the 1991 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, or START, which expired in December.

Lavrov said the two sides now are discussing the time and place for President Barack Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev to sign the new deal, which also

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must be ratified by each country's legislature.

"We are now at the finish line," Lavrov said.

Clinton was a bit more circumspect.

"We have a saying in the United States: 'Don't count your chickens before they hatch,'" she said. "And that means that we are beginning our discussions about when and where our two presidents will sign the START agreement. But we don't want to get ahead of ourselves. First, our negotiators have to sign on the dotted line, so to speak."

A Clinton spokesman, P.J. Crowley, said later that the negotiators were "down to one or two issues" before completing the deal.

Another negotiating session was to be held Friday in Geneva, Switzerland.

The Obama administration has been unsuccessful in pressing Iran to take steps to reassure the world of its nuclear intentions and has pointed to its secret construction of a uranium enrichment plant — disclosed by the West last fall — as evidence that Iran's intentions are not purely peaceful.

Clinton suggested that by endorsing Iran's startup of its Bushehr power plant, Tehran would get the mistaken impression that the rest of the world accepted its claim that it wants nuclear power only for electricity generation and not to secretly produce nuclear bombs.

Crowley said Clinton's comment was not intended as criticism of Russia's involvement in the Bushehr project, which has been decades in the making.

Russia agrees that Iran must not acquire nuclear weapons, but it has close commercial ties with Tehran and has used its position as a veto-wielding permanent U.N. Security Council member to water down Western-backed sanctions. Lavrov said he and Clinton discussed the prospect of a new U.N. sanctions resolution, but he made clear that Moscow does not see new sanctions as inevitable.

"As for sanctions that might be discussed in the United Nations Security Council, that discussion has not begun yet," Lavrov said.

Asked what Russia was doing to nudge China — which also has veto power in the Security Council — toward accepting the idea of new sanctions against Iran, Lavrov indicated that China has demonstrated that it is willing to live up to its obligations as a nuclear power.

He said China, like the U.S, Russia and other nuclear weapons states, has "a special commitment and obligation" to ensure that nuclear weapons technology does not spread around the world. "Our Chinese partners have never given us any grounds to suspect them of insufficient attention to nonproliferation issues," he said.

Clinton and Lavrov were attending a dinner Thursday with representatives of the European Union and the United Nations — together known as the Quartet — to discuss the recent setbacks in getting Israel and the Palestinians to return to peace negotiations. Clinton appeared to be seeking to calm U.S. relations with Israel, which were roiled last week after Israel announced new housing for Jews in east Jerusalem.

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The announcement, made during a visit to Israel by Vice President Joe Biden, was seen by the Obama administration as an insult and a repudiation of U.S. efforts to get Israel to halt construction of additional Jewish settlements.

"Our goals remain the same," Clinton said. "It is to relaunch negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians on a path that will lead to a two-state solution. Nothing has happened that in any way affects our commitment to pursuing that."

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