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# Vladimir Putin pledges to complete Iranian nuclear reactor

By Tony Halpin in Moscow

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Sources: Council on Foreign Relations; Institute for Defence Studies

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President Putin forged an alliance with Iran yesterday against any military action by the West and pledged to complete the controversial Iranian nuclear power plant at Bushehr.

A summit of Caspian Sea nations in Tehran agreed to bar foreign states from using their territory for military strikes against a member country. Mr Putin, the first Kremlin leader to visit Iran since the Second World War, insisted that the use of force was unacceptable.

"It is important . . . that we not only not use any kind of force but also do not even think about the possibility of using force," he told the leaders of Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

The declaration of the five states did not specify a particular threat. Rumours have long circulated, however, that the US is seeking Azerbaijan's permission to use airfields for possible military action to stop Iran from developing a nuclear bomb.

Mr Putin arrived in Tehran for the summit amid tight security after warnings of a plot by suicide bombers to assassinate him. His visit is a propaganda coup for President Ahmadinejad as he faces American and European pressure for tougher United Nations sanctions to halt Iran's nuclear programme.

Mr Putin and Mr Ahmadinejad met after the summit for private talks. State television in Tehran quoted Mr Putin as saying that Russia would continue to "assist Iran's peaceful nuclear programme".

Russia is building Iran's first atomic power plant in the port city of Bushehr. A row over Iranian payments has slowed down the work, and Mr Putin emerged from yesterday's meeting without setting a date for the \$1 billion (£500 million) project.

However, Russian media later reported that Moscow had promised to complete the work on schedule. "The construction and the commissioning of Bushehr will be implemented in accordance with the agreed timetable," the Russian news agency Ria reported, citing the two leaders' joint statement. Mr Putin also invited Mr Ahmadinejad to Moscow.

Mr Putin said that the Bushehr contract would have to be reviewed to clarify legal matters and the financial obligations of each party. Moscow has delayed delivery of nuclear fuel for the station as part of the dispute.

The Tehran declaration strengthened Moscow's hostility to any attempt at a military solution. It also offered support for Iran by asserting the right of any country that had signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to develop peaceful nuclear energy "without discrimination". Tehran insists that its nuclear programme is purely for civil purposes to generate electricity.

The summit was called to try to settle the status of the Caspian among the five states that border the sea. Iran and the former Soviet Union shared it equally but there has been a 16-year dispute over mineral

rights since the emergence the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The leaders failed to reach agreement on dividing the seabed, which is believed to hold the world's third-largest reserves of oil and gas. They agreed to meet again in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan, next year.

Ties that bind

â€" Gazprom, Russia's state-controlled energy company, has invested \$750 million (Â£370 million) in projects in Iran

â€" Russia exports \$2 billion of metal and machinery to Iran a year

â€" Russia has supplied nuclear technology to Iran, including the \$1 billion Bushehr reactor

â€" Russia is a key supplier of arms to Iran, including a \$700 million air-defence system, MiG29 combat aircraft and T72 tanks

â€" Iran's goodwill is useful for Russia's attempts to control fractious Muslim minorities in Central Asia and the Caucasus

â€" Both countries oppose the eastward expansion of Nato

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