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Russia's Scary S-400 Air Defense System Is Now Protecting the Skies Above Crimea

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Russia is bolstering its anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) capabilities in Crimea with the addition of the potent S-400 Triumf air and missile defense system.

The addition of the S-400—which can be armed with the 250-mile range 40N6—would afford Moscow the ability not only to keep the peninsula safe from attack, but also threaten airspace deep inside Ukraine should the Kremlin choose to do so.

“A ceremony will be held in the anti-aircraft missile regiment of the 4th Air Force and Air Defense Army of the Southern Military District on January 14 for the command post and the S-400 Triumf battalion to assume combat duty,” reads Russian Defense Ministry statement according to the Moscow-based TASS News Agency [3].

According to manufacturer Almaz-Antey, [4] the S-400 “baseline” system can engage targets at ranges of more than 155 miles at altitudes up to 90,000 feet. Also of note, the S-400 can support at least three types of missiles with differing capabilities. According to Western sources, some versions of those missiles are capable of engaging targets as far away as 250 miles. The S-400 can track 300 targets simultaneously and engage 36 of those at any one time.

As one senior U.S. Marine Corps aviator told me earlier, the S-300 and S-400 series are a deadly threat to everything except the most advanced stealth fighters and bombers. “A complete game changer for all fourth-gen aircraft [like the F-15, F-16 and F/A-18]. That thing is a beast and you don’t want to get near it,” he said.

Only the Lockheed Martin F-22 Raptor, F-35 and Northrop Grumman B-2 Spirit stealth bomber would be able to operate inside areas protected by those weapons. But even those aircraft could be challenged if there were enough S-300 or S-400 batteries operating as part of an integrated air defense network.

The exact number and location of the surface-to-air missile batteries would make a huge difference. The problem is further compounded by the fact that both systems are mobile—and can move at a moment’s notice. “If they’re all over every square inch of the country, then it doesn’t matter what you put out there—it’s going to be a challenge,” a senior Air Force official with extensive stealth experience told me.

For the United States, the solution is to move forward with next-generation systems like the F-35, the Next Generation Jammer, B-21 Raider and potentially a new stealthy naval aircraft—such as the proposed F/A-XX or Next Generation Air Dominance. New next-generation cruise missiles are also going to be needed to penetrate an ever more dense threat environment.