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Russia's Big Plans for Air Defense in Eurasia

Big plans, indeed, but will they materialize?

By Guy Plopsky
April 07, 2017

February 10, 2017 marked 22 years since the Russian Federation and nine other former Soviet republics ratified an agreement on the creation of a Commonwealth of Independent States joint air defense system (JADS).

At present, just six of the original ten signatories — Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan — remain as active participants in the agreement. A seventh state, Uzbekistan, withdrew from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) from 1999-2006 and then again in 2012, but continues to participate in joint Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) air defense exercises and maintains bilateral cooperation with Moscow on air defense matters.

As for the states that no longer participate, Turkmenistan and Georgia severed their cooperation in 1997 (the latter withdrew from the CIS altogether in 2008), while Ukraine (which, like Uzbekistan, cooperated with Moscow on a bilateral basis) ceased all military ties with Russia following the annexation of Crimea. Despite these losses, however, the JADS has proven to be remarkably resilient in the face of often shaky relations among its remaining active members. Indeed, the Kremlin has shown no intentions of giving up on the system and has big plans for its future.

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At present, Moscow is actively engaged in establishing so-called “joint regional air defense systems” under the JADS framework. According to the first deputy chief of Russia’s Aerospace Forces, Lieutenant-General Pavel Kurachenko, these joint regional systems will be created “in the Eastern European, Caucasus, and Central Asian regions of collective security.” Speaking to journalists in April 2016, Kurachenko announced that Russia and Belarus had already completed the formation of the first such system in the Eastern European region. Agreements on the creation of two other joint regional air defense systems in the Caucasus and Central Asian regions were signed with Kazakhstan and Armenia in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Talks are now underway with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to ratify an agreement on the establishment of similar systems.

For Russia, closer integration with the air defense networks of its partners (via the creation of joint regional systems) will grant its own forces greater warning and response times, as well as enhance Russia’s ability to coordinate and command joint forces. There are, however, serious doubts as to whether such regional systems can be successfully implemented in the foreseeable future, given that the air and air defense forces of most JADS participants remain in poor shape.

The above is particularly true with regard to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. As one Russian defense commentator correctly points out, “in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan there is no combat fighter aviation” and “air defense formations are not equipped with effective surface-to-air missile (SAM) systems.” Furthermore, both countries lack modern automated control systems. Without these systems, achieving desired levels of integration and establishing effective command and control over relevant forces will not be possible. This point is clearly emphasized in a 2014 article on the JADS in the authoritative Russian-language *Vozdushno-Kosmicheskaya Oborona* (Aerospace Defense) journal, which notes that the shortage (and in some cases complete absence) of modern automated control systems “does not allow for the complete resolution of main control tasks.”

Admittedly, Armenia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan have made evident progress in enhancing their air defense capabilities over the past decade, most notably via the acquisition of more capable SAM systems from Russia. However, given their cash-strapped military procurement budgets, these acquisitions were made possible solely as a result of Moscow’s ability (and willingness) to supply the systems at heavily discounted prices. In 2015-2016, for example, the Kremlin even transferred second-hand S-300PS SAM systems to Kazakhstan (five battalions) and Belarus (four battalions) free of charge (though the cost of their overhaul had to be paid for by Astana and, possibly, by Minsk as well). Special financial arrangements have also enabled Belarus and Armenia to procure a number of new Tor-M2E short-range and Buk-M2 medium-range SAM systems, respectively.

Unless similar financial concessions are granted in the future, Astana, Minsk, and Yerevan are unlikely to get their hands on much desired modern long-range SAM systems. Indeed, all three have previously expressed interest in procuring the S-400 *Triumf* from Russia; however, Moscow has proven reluctant to sell the high-in-demand *Triumf* at a lower cost, preferring to focus on the delivery of the advanced system to China, which can afford to pay for it in full. The

Kremlin is also in the final stages of signing a contract with India for the sale of four to five S-400 regiments, the deliveries of which are expected to begin in 2020. However, given the inability of Russia's defense industry to cope with growing demands for the S-400, this date could be pushed back, suggesting that even if one or more JADS members were to reach a future agreement with Russia for the acquisition of the S-400 at a lower cost, Moscow would likely be unable to supply the system until well into the 2020s.

Without modern long-range SAMs such as the *Triumpf*, the ability of JADS members to address existing and emerging challenges will remain very limited. This becomes particularly evident when placed in the context of the recently approved "CIS Aerospace Defense Concept," which, in the words of Kazakhstan's Ministry of Defense, has been developed as the result of the need to enhance the JADS "to a level that provides joint defense not only against aerial, but also against aerospace attacks." Indeed, unlike the S-400, which is intended to be capable of addressing threats posed by theater ballistic missiles (TBMs) and emerging hypersonic weapon systems, the SAM systems currently in service with Armenia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan possess very modest missile defense capabilities. The aforementioned S-300PS, for example, is a legacy system first fielded in 1983 and is only capable of intercepting battlefield range ballistic missiles (BRBMs). Even the more capable S-300PM and S-300V systems operated by Armenia and Belarus, respectively, offer very limited TBM defense capabilities. From a purely technical perspective then, the notion of a truly joint aerospace defense system is simply quixotic.

Moscow, however, is not delusional about the limitations of its partners. Speaking to journalists in September 2015, Lieutenant-General Korachenko noted that at present there are no intentions to create a joint missile defense system under the JADS framework, adding that the establishment of such a system "is a more distant prospect." As a number of Russian experts point out, more near-term plans will therefore likely focus on "establishing radar cover above the borders of JADS members. This will enable the Russian command to receive information on incidents in the air and in the space above allies and neighboring countries." Tighter cooperation on aerospace defense matters is also intended to preserve Moscow's access to its ballistic missile early warning and space surveillance assets located in the territories of other JADS members. These include the Hantsavichy radar station in southwestern Belarus, the Balkhash radar station in southeastern Kazakhstan, and the Okno-M electro-optical space surveillance station in southwestern Tajikistan.

Lastly, as with the agreements on the creation of joint regional air defense systems, closer cooperation in the sphere of aerospace defense will enable the Kremlin to apply yet more pressure on its partners to accept the deployment of Russian air and missile defense assets in their territories (in order to compensate for their inability to meet security commitments). At present, Russia already maintains several SAM battalions and a squadron of MiG-29 fighters in Armenia, as well as a number of short-range SAMs and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) pieces in Tajikistan that are intended to defend Russian ground forces stationed there. In the future, Moscow could also deploy fighter aircraft to Kant Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, which currently hosts Russian Su-25 attack aircraft and Mi-8 helicopters. A bilateral agreement extending the lease of the air base by 49 years was signed in 2009, but was later reduced to just 15 years (beginning from January 29, 2017). Explaining the decision to reduce the lease period, Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev noted that this was because "Kyrgyzstan has to rely solely on its own

strength in the future.” However, as evidenced by Russian President Vladimir Putin’s recent remarks on the issue, Moscow is confident that its forces won’t be leaving the base anytime soon.

For several years, the Kremlin had also hoped that Belarus would agree to host a Russian air base in its territory (given that the aging Belarusian fighter force remains ill-equipped to effectively execute the tasks demanded of it under the joint regional air defense agreement). Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenka, however, did not give in to Moscow’s pressure. As a result, Russia appears to have withdrawn its four Su-27SM fighters from the 61st Fighter Air Base near the city of Baranovichi, and, realizing that it has no other choice, will likely sell Minsk advanced Su-30SM multirole fighters (possibly at a heavily discounted price).

It should be noted that Moscow is also selling the above mentioned fighters to Kazakhstan. The latter received its first batch of four Su-30SMs from Russia in April 2015, followed by a second batch of two aircraft in December 2016. Astana’s decision to procure the Su-30SM most likely stemmed from a similar desire to avoid being pressured by Moscow into accepting Russian forces on its territory. Indeed, many in Kazakhstan are skeptical as to whether closer integration with Russia under the joint regional air defense agreement truly serves their country’s security interests. Kazakhstan’s government has even sought to limit the amount of control Russia will have over its air defenses by getting Moscow to agree on locating the joint system’s command post in Almaty and placing a Kazakh commander in charge (Armenia and Belarus have struck similar agreements with Russia as well). Astana is also seeking to reduce its dependency on Moscow for the supply of arms and training; however, by deciding to participate in the joint regional air defense system, Kazakhstan has inevitably tied itself closer to Russia. As an August 2016 *Russian Analytical Digest* report notes, the Russo-Kazakh “air defense collaboration will become a significant obstacle to the involvement of Western defense companies in this highly sensitive area of Kazakhstan’s defense sector.”

With aerospace defense continuing to gain prominence in Russian national security thinking, the JADS will become an increasingly important political and military tool for Moscow. The limited air defense (and even more limited missile defense) capabilities of Russia’s partners will, however, continue to serve as a major obstacle to the creation of effective joint regional air defense systems, and will greatly delay the development of the JADS to better address aerospace defense challenges. Nevertheless, the mere ratification of agreements on these matters allows Moscow to secure the presence of Russian assets already located within the territories of other JADS members, as well as granting Moscow the legal basis to pressure its partners into permitting the basing of additional Russian air and missile defense assets on their soil. Even if Russia’s partners are able to find the means to bolster their own capabilities and/ or resist Moscow’s pressure, closer integration and cooperation under the expanded JADS framework will still mean increased reliance on Moscow for the supply of new equipment and training. Either way, Moscow comes out a winner.