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The S-300: Game-Changing Weapon or Diplomatic Bargaining Chip?

Russia has announced it will supply the missile system to Iran, but Moscow may have another objective in mind.

By Quentin Buckholz

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On April 13, the Russian government announced that it would supply the advanced S-300 surface-to-air missile system to Iran, provoking predictable consternation in the United States, Europe, and Israel. While U.S. President Barack Obama's public response was unexpectedly understated, American and European officials, including Secretary of State John Kerry and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier, expressed concern about the proposed deal, and the Israeli government angrily threatened to retaliate against Russia by providing Ukraine with weapons. Western analysts and media outlets have suggested that the sale of the S-300 to Iran could alter the strategic balance in the region by greatly complicating any effort by the United States or Israel to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. Writing in *The National Interest* on April 20, Clint Hinote argued persuasively that the delivery of the S-300 to Iran could represent a "fundamental shift of military power for the region."

However, the reaction of Western politicians and analysts is overblown, because it overstates the chances that Iran will ever deploy a Russian-made S-300. The history of the S-300 in Russo-

Iranian relations shows that this particular weapons system, long sought by Tehran and dangled just out of reach by Moscow, serves primarily as a bargaining chip for the Kremlin in its relations with the West and is unlikely to actually be delivered to the Iranian military.

Following a decade of strained relations between Moscow and Tehran after the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the USSR (and subsequently Russia) emerged as a major arms supplier for Iran in 1989. The two countries negotiated a major arms deal during a historic summit in June of that year between Speaker of the Iranian Parliament Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, and continued to deepen their defense supply relationship over the following years. Concerned by Tehran's accumulation of Russian military hardware, the U.S. government exerted considerable pressure on Moscow to halt arms sales to Iran in the early 1990s. In 1995, Russia committed in the secret Gore-Chernomyrdin Agreement to cease all conventional weapons sales to Iran by the end of 1999. However, Moscow unilaterally abrogated the pact in November 2000, sparking a flurry of meetings between Russian and Iranian defense officials eager to conclude new supply deals. Public remarks by both Russian and Iranian officials indicate that the S-300 system has been a priority for Iranian procurement officials since at least 1998. The system was a topic of discussion at the March 2001 summit in Moscow between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, and at numerous meetings between Russian and Iranian defense officials in subsequent years.

Diplomatic Controversy

Much to the disappointment of their Iranian counterparts, however, Russian officials initially refused to sell the S-300 to Tehran. Moscow's skittishness stemmed from the system's potential to spark significant political blowback, to a far greater extent than the other military hardware under discussion (including MI-17 transport helicopters and SU-25 fighter jets). The political explosiveness of the S-300 had been vividly demonstrated in the 1998 Cyprus Missile Crisis, when Russia's sale of an S-300 system to Cyprus provoked a furious Turkish response and a major diplomatic crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean. Recognizing that the United States and the West viewed the S-300 with particular concern, Moscow proved unwilling to court the diplomatic controversy certain to be associated with a sale of the system to Iran. Moscow's long and complicated history with Iran and Russian unwillingness to see the emergence of a nuclear power in the country's immediate southern vicinity also contributed to the Kremlin's unease regarding potential S-300 sales to Iran. As the two countries deepened their defense procurement relationship over the next several years, Russia continued to refuse repeated requests for the S-300.

In 2007, however, Russia finally acceded to Iran's longstanding wish and negotiated a contract, valued at \$800 million, to deliver five S-300 systems. This sudden reversal clearly reflected factors beyond the commercial or diplomatic merits of the deal itself. The Kremlin's finalization of the contract constituted a sharp geopolitical jab at the United States and marked the emergence of the S-300 as a political bargaining chip. The agreement followed a steady deterioration in U.S.-Russia relations, beginning with the Bush administration's withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty in 2002. The downward diplomatic trend continued through the invasion of Iraq in 2003 (which Russia strongly opposed) and culminated in Bush's

announcement in 2007 of a ballistic missile defense scheme under which the U.S. would base interceptor missiles in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic. Infuriated by the deployment of missile defense infrastructure in Russia's near abroad, Moscow retaliated diplomatically by offering the S-300 to Iran.

However, delivery of the system was banned by Russian President Dmitry Medvedev in 2010, as part of the overall amelioration of Russo-American relations sought under the Obama administration's "reset" policy. Here again, Kremlin decision-making regarding the S-300 was guided by the state of relations with the United States. The ban was clearly a reciprocal concession, offered in response to the Obama administration's decision to replace the Bush administration's missile defense plan for Eastern Europe with an initially sea-based scheme that would not immediately require basing missile defense systems in Eastern Europe.

Beyond the clear link between the Kremlin's decision and the state of Russo-American relations, it is noteworthy that no timetable for delivery was finalized during the three years between the initial agreement and Medvedev's embargo. It appears that Russia never had any intention of actually delivering the S-300 to Iran, suggesting that the Kremlin was able to claim credit for a major "concession" in negotiations with the Obama administration by publicly forswearing something it did not intend to do in the first place. Moscow's overall reluctance to provide a potentially "game-changing" weapons system to Iran had not dissipated, but the Kremlin had come to understand the value of the S-300 in its relations with the United States.

Most recently, a new downturn in Russo-American relations has brought yet another Russian turnabout on the S-300. The delivery ban was lifted by Putin in April 2015, as relations between Russia and the West reached their lowest point since the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. In response to Russian actions in Ukraine, the U.S. and the EU imposed significant sanctions on Russian businesses and individuals in the spring and summer of 2014. As the situation in eastern Ukraine appears to have settled into a "frozen conflict," the two sides remain locked in a political standoff. The West continues to demand that Putin actively work to implement the Minsk Agreement and reintegrate the separatist territories of Donetsk and Luhansk into Ukraine. American and European leaders have repeatedly asserted that Western sanctions, bitterly denounced by the Kremlin, will not be lifted until Russia complies. Accordingly, Putin's suspension of the prohibition on S-300 deliveries to Iran comes at a particularly low moment in Russia's relations with the United States and the West.

However, Russian officials have remained characteristically vague on potential delivery timelines, in an apparent rerun of the failure to provide a specific timeline at any point between 2007 and 2010. Following the fanfare-laden announcements by Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov that the sale would proceed, lower-ranking officials like Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov and Deputy Head of the National Security Council Yevgeny Lyukanov hastily cautioned media outlets that no delivery date had been finalized and that "the implementation of this project will take some time." Nearly two months after Putin's announcement, the two sides have yet to finalize a new contract, suggesting that the lifting of the ban may have been a symbolic gesture geared towards a Western, as opposed to Iranian, audience. This pattern of behavior closely tracks Russian actions following the initial agreement in 2007.

This historical record shows clearly that Russian willingness to sell (or offer to sell) the S-300 to Iran is entirely a function of trends in the Russo-American relationship. So why has the Kremlin elected to put this issue back on the table now? The decision appears to relate to Russia's deteriorating strategic position vis-à-vis the United States and Europe. In the two key areas in the current geopolitical standoff between Russia and the West, Ukraine and Syria, the Russian strategic position has deteriorated significantly in recent weeks. Accordingly, the Putin regime is attempting to introduce a new factor into the geopolitical equation, establishing the basis for a more favorable quid pro quo.

As pressure on Putin to improve relations with the West mounts within the Russian ruling elite, the S-300 is likely to reassume its traditional role as a political bargaining chip. Putin likely intends to use the sale in an effort to escape the binary options presented by the West with regard to the Ukraine crisis: Either cooperate in the reintegration of separatist territories into Ukraine or face continued sanctions. Although he is eager to see Western sanctions lifted, Putin is also deeply reluctant to be seen as "backing down" in Ukraine, particularly now that his state-run media apparatus has whipped the Russian populace into a state of nationalist frenzy with tales of fascist juntas in Kyiv and neo-Nazi militias in Donbass. By offering Iran the S-300, an offer that can subsequently be cancelled or withdrawn, Putin has introduced another prospective concession, possibly facilitating a "third way" out of his present Ukraine-related dilemma. As tentative efforts to restore normal working relations between Russia and the West (embodied in Kerry's recent visit to Sochi and Moscow) proceed, the S-300's next appearance will be at the negotiating table between Russia and the West, not at an Iranian military base. Iranian defense officials eager to deploy the S-300 around the country's nuclear facilities at Arak and Natanz should brace for yet another disappointment.