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The Russia–Iran S-300 Air Defense Systems Deal: Beware of Russians Bearing Gifts

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Russian state news agencies have confirmed that Moscow signed a contract in 2007 to sell advanced, long-range S-300 air-defense systems to Iran, and “the contract itself...is being gradually executed.” However, an anonymous official claimed that “the further implementation of the contract depends in large part on the developing international situation and the decision of the country’s leaders.” Just like with the U.S. Air Force base being evicted from Kyrgyzstan, Russia has created a problem and then offered to negotiate a solution.

This revelation comes after Russian President Dmitri Medvedev’s announcement Tuesday that Russia is preparing to undertake a “large scale” and “comprehensive” rearmament of the Russian military. It also follows the March 13 statement by Major General Anatoly Zhikharev, the commander of the Russian Strategic Aviation that the Kremlin is considering Venezuelan and Cuban offers to host strategic Russian bombers.

Pushing the “Overload” Button. This series of events stands in stark contrast to the series of overtures by the Obama Administration. These started with Vice President Joe Biden’s suggestion that America push “the reset button” on relations with Russia. According to *The New York Times*, President Obama sent a “secret,” hand-delivered letter to President Dmitry Medvedev suggesting that if Russia cooperates with the United States in preventing Iran from developing long-range nuclear missile capabilities, the need for a new missile defense system in Europe would be eliminated—a *quid pro quo* that President Obama has denied. The letter proposes a “united front” to achieve this goal.¹

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton then sought to build on the “reset” button in her first meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Brussels two weeks ago. As a token, she brought a yellow box with a button and the word *reset* on both sides in English and Russian. Unfortunately, the State Department got the Russian word for “reset” wrong, and instead it said “overload.” This is highly symbolic, as incompetence and haste in foreign affairs are the enemies of wisdom, or as the Russian proverb goes, “Measure seven times before cutting.”

The latest revelation of the S-300 sale to Iran comes after America’s good-faith gestures toward Moscow and occurs just two weeks before President Obama will meet President Medvedev in London at the G-20 summit in April.

Gargoyles in Tehran. The Russian S-300 system (NATO designations SA-10 Grumble, SA-12 Giant/Gladiator, SA-20 Gargoyle) is considered to be one of the most advanced surface-to-air systems in the world. The long-range surface-to-air missile system defends against aircraft, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles.

The S-300’s radar can track up to 100 targets and engage up to 12 targets simultaneously within the 200-kilometer (120 mile) range and up to 27 kilometers (16.4 miles) in altitude.

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Although the sale of the S-300 to Iran is not prohibited, such a deal would be a game changer in the Middle East. Tehran could threaten U.S. and allied troops' aerial assets in Afghanistan and Iraq if Iran were to deploy the system along its borders. Furthermore, it would boost the defense of Iran's Bushehr reactor, which Russia has built. Finally, Tehran could also use S-300s to protect its Natanz uranium enrichment plant, Arak heavy water plant, and other components of its sprawling nuclear and missile complex.

A nuclear-armed Iran would be a threat to the region as Iran uses its nuclear arsenal to foster its hegemony in the Persian Gulf and beyond and would likely trigger a regional nuclear arms race. Israel, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia would not sit idly while Tehran is building its nuclear arsenal.

There are some voices in the expert community, the Obama Administration, and Europe who believe that the Kremlin is able and willing to exert pressure on Iran to prevent it from going nuclear, as the high-level bipartisan panel jointly organized by the Nixon Center and Harvard University's Belfer Center recently suggested. This may be a case of wishful thinking, and Russia's relationship with Iran should be examined more closely.

Moscow's Trojan Horse—and a Bargaining Chip. Since the Iraq War, the Kremlin championed the notion of "multipolarity," in which U.S. influence would be checked by Russia, China, India, and a swath of authoritarian states. Today, Russia uses Iran as a geopolitical battering ram against the U.S. and its allies in the Gulf. Putin and Medvedev are calling for a new geopolitical and economic architecture—not only in Europe but throughout the entire world—based on spheres of influence.

Iran is Russia's stalking horse in the Middle East. Moscow views the rabidly anti-American regime in Tehran as a key platform to revive its regional and international influence and challenge U.S. influence at the same time. Russia's interests in Iran go back to the Soviet era, when Moscow sold weapons to both

Baghdad (its principal client) and Tehran. The Kremlin supports Iran's nuclear program, knowing that sanctions will help to keep Iran in Russia's commercial sphere of influence.

Moscow's interests are both geopolitical and commercial and militate against substantial cooperation or any potential "grand bargain." The Kremlin would like to see Washington delaying or canceling plans for European missile defense, scaling back relations with Eurasia's independent states, preventing Ukraine and Georgia's membership in NATO, and overlooking Russia's domestic human rights abuses. Yet President Medvedev announced earlier this month that there will be no linkage to Russian support of Iran. Thus, any such bargain is doomed to failure. These factors must be taken into account when considering any version of a "grand bargain."

Russians Bearing Gifts. The Obama Administration should use extreme caution in negotiating Russian cooperation on Iran. While the White House is understandably preoccupied with Russian policy, it should balance it with boosting missile defenses, engagement with America's European allies, and ongoing involvement in Eurasian and Caspian affairs.

Inability to see through the Russian game on Iran may lead to a deteriorating security situation in Eurasia and a decline of American influence in Europe and the Middle East. If Russia, however, reconsiders its anti-American stance and offers concrete actions, not just rhetoric, the United States should be prepared to pursue matters of common interest, such as keeping power-hungry Iran in check. In the meantime, the sand in the Middle Eastern doomsday scenario hourglass is running out.

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1. Peter Baker, "Obama Offered Deal to Russia in Secret Letter," *The New York Times*, March 2, 2009, at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/03/washington/03prexy.html?partner=rss&emc=rss> (March 3, 2009); Associated Press, "Russian President to Face Questions Over US letter," *International Herald Tribune*, March 3, 2009, at <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2009/03/03/europe/EU-Spain-Medvedev.php> (March 3, 2009).