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Russian Missiles to Syria Endanger U.S. Foreign Policy Goals

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Russia is planning to supply Syria game-changing weapons which will shift the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean in favor of President Bashar al-Assad's regime and may make any future operations against the Assad forces considerably more difficult. If Moscow's missile supply plans go through, the Russian advanced weapons systems would be able to target NATO ships as far as 300 kilometers off the coast of Syria, and shoot down aircraft in a radius of up to 200 kilometers, including over Turkey, Israel, Iraq, Jordan, and the Mediterranean. This would interfere with any potential U.S.- or NATO-led military or humanitarian operations, including no-fly zones, safe zones, supply routes, or refugee assistance projects.

Army General Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, claimed that "we do not have options to prevent the delivery of any military sales to the Syrians."¹ However, the U.S. actually does have some options on the table.

The Last Ally. Russia's position is not surprising. Russian President Vladimir Putin has decided to make a stand on Syria, as it is Moscow's last Arab ally from the era of socialist and nationalist regimes

supported by the Soviet Union. These included Egypt (until 1972), Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Muammar Qadhafi's Libya, Algeria, Syria, and Yemen.

Syria has been Moscow's long-term ally. The Soviet Union supported Damascus in its preparations for war against Israel in 1967 and in the First Lebanon War in 1982. The USSR sold Syria several generations of cutting-edge weaponry, including fighter jets. In 2005, Moscow forgave Damascus \$10 billion out of some \$13 billion of its Soviet-era debt and followed up with new arms sales, most of them with Iranian financing. Some of the advanced systems, such as anti-tank Kornet missiles, were in turn supplied by Syria to Hezbollah, which is recognized by the U.S. as a terrorist organization and is now fighting alongside the Assad forces against the rebels. At the time of this writing, Moscow refuses to pressure Assad to stop the bloodshed despite considerable cajoling from the U.S.

Russia, which dreams of a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean, also places high strategic value on its small naval base in Tartus, Syria's second-largest port city, on the Mediterranean coast. The Black Sea Fleet also has an anchorage in the principal Syrian port city of Latakia. In January 2013, elements of all the Russian fleets assembled in the eastern Mediterranean to demonstrate that Russia is back in the strategic game in the Levant.

Iran, another Russian protégé, is Syria's main strategic ally. Russia perceives the fight over Syria—which also involves Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia (all of which support the mostly Sunni rebels)—as aimed at weakening Iran, which Russia does not want to happen.

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<http://report.heritage.org/ib3950>

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Moscow's Global Agenda. There is also a global dimension to Russia's pro-Assad policy. Moscow has repeatedly stated that the use of force is to be controlled by the United Nations Security Council and has rejected any U.S.- and Europe-led regime changes, including in Iraq and Libya. It demands non-interference by foreign powers in internal conflicts, fearing that under some circumstances, under the "responsibility to protect" doctrine, Russia could itself become a target of such intervention.

Moreover, Moscow views the Arab Spring as a U.S.-supported Islamist revolution that was triggered by U.S.-developed tools, including Twitter and Facebook. Russian experts and diplomats point out that the Arab Spring is dominated by extremists who also have deep ties to the Russian Islamist insurgency in the North Caucasus and are spreading their teachings throughout Russia. Moscow fears that the Syrian conflict could spread to its "near abroad" in the former USSR² and to the North Caucasus.

Policy Failure? The Kremlin's policies, while keeping the Assad regime afloat, are demonstrating Moscow's reliability as an ally, and prolonging the conflict and suffering, have so far seriously damaged Russia's relations with the West and the Sunni Arab world. Russia has consistently blocked U.S.-led efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the Syrian civil war. It has repeatedly vetoed U.N. Security Council resolutions and refused to offer Assad security guarantees or political asylum.

While Russian-Israeli relations have improved in the past 20 years, Moscow's planned supply of advanced missiles would undermine Israel's qualitative military edge—which is the U.S. policy—and push it to take measures against any transfer of these weapons to Hezbollah with potentially explosive consequences.

What Should the U.S. Do? Russia's support of the Assad regime, including its intended supply of advanced missiles, is undermining U.S. leadership in the Middle East, allowing radicals to take the lead

among the Syrian resistance, and relieving international pressures on Iran, which is racing toward nuclear weapons capabilities. The U.S. and its allies need to take steps to bring Russia on board in search of a solution. Specifically, the U.S. and its allies should:

- Condition the convening of the upcoming Geneva peace conference on cancellation of missile supplies to Damascus.
- Develop a sanctions regime against Russian companies and banks involved in supplying arms and dual-use technology to Iran and Syria. These include arms exporter Rosoboronexport, missile manufacturer Central Special Construction Bureau Progress, aircraft manufacturer Sukhoi, the Tula Armaments Bureau, rocket manufacturer Tula Special Device Building Bureau, the Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, Vneshekonombank, and Vneshtorgbank. The U.S. Treasury should cooperate with European allies to force Moscow to halt these problematic and destabilizing arms sales.³
- Encourage the government of Turkey, a NATO ally and a major Russian trade partner, to stop Russian state-owned companies from building its four planned nuclear reactors there. Turkey is angry at Russia's championing of Assad and recently force-landed a Syrian plane that was bringing radar parts to Syria from Russia. Ankara has allowed Russian Sunni Muslims from the Caucasus to go fight against the Assad regime via Turkish territory. It should not be an impossible task to persuade the Turks that they are better off building their nuclear reactors with either U.S.- or European-based suppliers.
- Boost NATO naval presence in the eastern Mediterranean in response to Moscow's revival of its permanent Mediterranean squadron.

1. Paul D. Shinkman, "New Russian Missile Sales to Syria Makes Assad 'Prone to Miscalculation,'" *U.S. News and World Report*, May 17, 2013, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2013/05/17/new-russian-missile-sales-to-syria-makes-assad-prone-to-miscalculation> (accessed May 18, 2013).

2. Dmitry Trenin, "The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy," Moscow Carnegie Center, February 12, 2013, <http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=50909> (accessed May 21, 2013).

3. See Ariel Cohen, "How the U.S. Should Respond to Russia's Unhelpful Role in the Middle East," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 2662, March 15, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/03/how-the-us-should-respond-to-russias-unhelpful-role-in-the-middle-east>.

- Develop integrated missile defense systems and sensors among the U.S. Sixth Fleet, Turkey, and Israel, which are currently not synchronized, to become capable of defending U.S. forces and these countries from Syria's and Hezbollah's surface-to-surface missiles.
- Share information with allies regarding electronic warfare measures capable of defending against S-300 and P-800.

Arms Sales Not Constructive. Supplying advanced missiles to Assad is completely inconsistent with Moscow's proclaimed desire to be a constructive partner in seeking a permanent solution to the Syrian crisis. The Obama Administration should

not allow Russia to add the Yakhont and the S-300 into what is already a dangerous mix of weaponry and civil war.

Russia and Iran should not be allowed to score a strategic victory against the U.S. and its allies by continuing to prop up the Assad regime. The Obama Administration should encourage Moscow to work with the U.S. and others to seek a transitional solution for Syria that would get rid of the Assad regime while keeping radical Islamists out of power.

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