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Prospects for the Delivery of Russian S-300 Systems to Syria: A Real or Virtual Threat?

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In spring 2013, Russia made unclear declarations about the possibility it may deliver modern S-300 air-defence systems to the Syrian government. These declarations increased the West's concerns about the costs of any military engagement in the Syria conflict, for instance, providing air support for the rebels there. Clearly, a Syria armed with S-300s would not neutralise the quantitative and qualitative domination of the air forces of the U.S, NATO or Israel. However, this issue became part of the diplomatic and disinformation activities of Russia towards the West, even when it was fully aware of all of the problems such assistance to Syria would create.

Russian Declarations. In the spring of 2013, Russian officials suggested a few times the possibility the country would arm Syria with advanced air-defence systems, the S-300 PMU-1 (in NATO code it is known as the SA-10 Grumble). The S-300 is the base for a whole family of air-defence and ballistic missile defence systems. The S-300 PMU-1 and the modified S-300 PMU-2 Favorit (SA-20 Gargoyle) are currently the pillars of the air defences of Russia and China.[1]

Russian–Syrian negotiations on the delivery of the S-300s began in 2005 when Russia cancelled the majority of Syria's debt for Soviet arms and equipment ($8 billion of $12 billion total). Since 2006 and after many detailed agreements, Russia began deliveries of a few air and coastal defence systems. The Russian deliveries have included the tactical air-defence systems Tor/SA-15, Buk/SA-17 and Pantsyr/SA-22, as well as modernisation of obsolete S-200E/SA-5 and S-125/SA-3 systems.

A Syria armed with S-300 PMU-1s might change the military balance in the region due to the missiles' 200 km range and capability to intercept airplanes and cruise or ballistic missiles at low altitudes. The supposed contract would include four to six batteries of S-300s, 144 missiles, as well as radar and logistics worth $834-900 million. According to some sources, these costs would be fully covered by Iran, which also has been negotiating with Russia to acquire the S-300 and is now paying for almost all of the military supplies to Syria. Due to the importance of the issue, the prevention of the delivery of the S-300s to the Syrian government was a goal of a confidential visit by Israel's prime minister to Moscow in May 2013.

According to Russia, the potential delivery of the S-300s would be a fulfilment of an earlier agreement signed before the escalation of the Syrian conflict. However, the head of Russian diplomacy avoided confirming to media whether such an agreement exists at all or if the deliveries would go ahead. At the same time, he stressed that the plans for the S-300 deliveries would force the West and Israel to think twice in their calculations of any military option towards the crisis in Syria. Many Western analysts also agreed that the presence of the S-300s might complicate the implementation of an air campaign or a no-fly zone in Syria. They also stressed that Syria's air defences even without

[1] Produced by the Almaz company, the S-300 and its S-400 Triumf (SA-21 Growler) modification should not be confused with Antei's S-300 V (SA-12 Gladiator), designed mainly against theatre ballistic missiles. The S-300 PMU was originally planned for the Soviet Air Defence Forces while the S-300 V was designed as a mobile defence system for the Land Forces.

the S-300 are the strongest in the Middle East: it is more advanced and a few times larger in scale than the air defences in Libya during NATO's operations there in 2011.

Analogies/Differences with Iran. Some analysts have tried to compare the Russian plans for S-300 deliveries to Syria with its earlier negotiations with Iran. The Russian–Iranian talks were conducted during 2005-2009. During these negotiations, Russia also sent out many contradictory suggestions, and even at some point Iran claimed to have received the S-300s. Also during this period there were different opinions in Moscow about the importance of Russia's particular interests and priorities in its relations with the U.S. and Iran.

The S-300s also have been an important element in the multi-dimensional negotiations and the "reset" in U.S. relations with Russia, and in Russian relations with Israel. Russia has tied S-300 exports to requested changes in U.S. plans for missile defence in Europe (autumn 2009) and to Russia's approval of UN Security Council Resolution 1929 (spring 2010), which authorised more acute sanctions towards Iran. Finally, in September 2010, the president of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, cancelled the contracts with Iran. After an international arbitrator's ruling, Russia paid back some money to Iran (the exact amount is unknown) from its contract for 15–20 batteries of the S-300 (initially, the contract was worth almost a billion dollars). At the same time, Russia finalised a contract with Israel to license production of unmanned aerial vehicles and cooperation in their space industries. The Israeli–Russian contracts were also estimated to be worth close to a billion dollars. Israel suspended some elements of its military cooperation with Georgia and Azerbaijan, which also helped improve ties with Russia.

Nevertheless, there are differences between the cancelled deliveries of the S-300 systems to Iran and the potential deliveries to Syria. Russian interests are far beyond commercial and include the need to demonstrate credibility among its traditional partners in the region. There is no UN Security Council embargo on previous contracts between Russia and Syria. In this context, Russia fulfilled at the end of 2011 its commitment to Syria to deliver Yakhont-E/SS-N-26 advanced coastal defence systems. As a result, the U.S. and Israel are concerned about Russia doing the same with the S-300s. The U.S. has no visible political or economic offer for Russia that could be part of any "package deal" on Syria, as was the case with Iran. However, in Israel there are opinions favourable towards offering attractive concessions to Russia's Gazprom for exploration and exploitation of offshore reserves in the Mediterranean Sea. And even less probable seems to be media speculation about future contracts between Saudi Arabia and Russia for military equipment (worth $15 billion) in return for a decrease in Russian support and assistance to Syria.

Syria as a "Shooting Range" for the S-300? Even if the S-300 deliveries might complicate U.S, NATO or Israeli military plans, it would not have an essential impact on the internal dynamics of the civil war in Syria. If the S-300s were operational in Syria, it would be their "debut" against the air forces of NATO or Israel in case they choose military engagement. However, there are doubts whether the S-300 would be fully efficient in real combat conditions. Every air defence system—even the most sophisticated—can be defeated if the attacking party has a sufficient qualitative and quantitative edge. Military experts in the U.S. and Israel are familiar with the S-300 because their air forces have trained to suppress air defences armed with this system in Bulgaria, Slovakia and Greece. In the last decade, Israel was designing and arming itself with the ITALD system (Improved Tactical Air Launched Decoy), which is able to decoy radar as well as the S-300 command-and-control systems. Even armed with S-300s, Syria would not likely stop more advanced "stealth" aircraft, such as the U.S. Air Force's F-22, F-35 and B-2, which are not visible on the system's radar.

Raids by the Israeli Air Force against selected targets in Syria in 2013 suggest that it would be easy to destroy any S-300 batteries employed there. This kind of threat has already been noted by the government of Israel, and the destruction of the Yakhont-E systems in May 2013 add credibility to the Israeli warnings. It is also clear that in case Russia is determined to deliver the S-300s, additional Russian advisors and experts would be needed. This would increase the risk of Russian deaths as a result of rebel attacks or in the case of American or Israeli bombings. All these factors taken into account might work against Russia making a final decision to deliver the S-300s.

Conclusion. The potential delivery of Russian S-300s to Syria indeed might complicate the majority of military options being considered by the U.S. and Israel for the Syrian conflict. The Russian declarations and suggestions are unclear due to the uncertainty about any detailed Russia–Syria agreement that should accompany such weapons delivery. That is why the S-300 issue seems to be more of an element of disinformation used by Russia to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the West to deter military intervention in Syria. These kinds of suggestions by Russia play into its image in Syria and Iran. From available sources, it is also hard to indicate any Western–Russian or Israeli–Russian "package deal" on Syria that might be similar to the cancellation of previous contracts for the delivery of S-300s to Iran. More clear are factors that might deter Russia from taking this risky step, especially if it would need to send Russian personnel and suffer losses among its ranks. The NATO countries and the EU in their consultations with Russia should also stress other risks, such as the possibility of transfers of the S-300 from Syria to Hezbollah or Iran. The S-300 issue may be considered another indicator of Russia's real attitude towards the West and Israel. Equal attention should be directed towards ongoing consultations between Russia and Saudi Arabia about the situation in Syria. There are no doubts that if Russia delivers the S-300s to Syria in the face of U.S., NATO and Israel military engagement, there would be a real combat test of this system.