



## **Iran UN Sanctions Relief – The Road Towards S-400 and Deterring US/Israeli Airstrikes?**

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### **Abstract**

As the P5+1 meets again to decide on UN sanctions relief, the world powers should consider the implications of removing the levee and potentially allowing Iran to join a military alliance to deter a future US/Israeli airstrike. Lifting UN sanctions would remove the obstacle for Iran to obtain a Eurasian security umbrella and formal membership in the China-Russia dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as well as the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). It would also pave the road for Russia to supply Iran with the S-300 and S-400 missile defense system, and possibly foreclose future US or Israeli airstrike options should Iran surreptitiously continue with its nuclear program.

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## Analyse

Iran is currently seeking quick relief<sup>1</sup> from United Nations sanctions in the latest round of nuclear talks, possibly paving the road towards formal membership in the China-Russia dominated Eurasian security bloc, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Russia currently chairs the rotating presidency, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said SCO is ready to admit Iran<sup>2</sup> this year if UN sanctions are lifted. SCO charter bars membership for sanctioned candidate states.

Sanctions relief could also pave the way for Russia to supply Iran with the S-300<sup>3</sup> and S-400 missile defense system, and possibly foreclose future US or Israeli airstrike options should Iran surreptitiously continue with its nuclear program.

Colonel General Leonid Ivashov said “we will probably deliver them,” and the new demand by Iran for UN sanctions relief coincides with its 20 January military agreement with Russia for joint military exercise, counter-terrorism, and naval use of each other’s ports.

Lifting these sanctions would thus clear the way for Iran to join the SCO and allow for full-fledge military cooperation between Russia, Iran and China. The tripartite powers are all under western sanctions and arms embargo over Crimea, nuclear program, and Tiananmen Square crackdown, so SCO provides a buffer against unilateral US or EU sanctions not approved by the UN.

### Iran seeks Eurasian alliance

Dubbed the “NATO of the East”, the SCO consists of members and observers that include China, Russia, central Asian republics, as well as Iran and Pakistan. In face of ISIS and other terrorist threats plaguing the Middle East, AfPak, Central Asia, Russia’s Chechnya and China’s Xinjiang, SCO is emerging as a regional security provider across Eurasia. As NATO withdraws from Afghanistan and US rebalances to Asia, Moscow, Beijing and Tehran are upgrading their military cooperation and asserting their regional influence.

China and Iran increased their military cooperation in October on the heels of their joint naval exercise in the Persian Gulf, while Beijing and Moscow also conducted naval war games off the Syrian coast in the Eastern Mediterranean last year, with another planned exercise this coming spring. This is a form of gunboat diplomacy to signal support for the Assad regime.

Iran aside, Russia and China both have vested interest in supporting Assad. Syria hosts Russia’s only warm water naval port in Tartus, and in December 2013 Moscow signed a \$100 million 25-year contract between Russia’s Soyuzneftegaz and the Assad regime for oil exploration off the Syrian coast. Soyuzneftegaz plans to build an oil pipeline between Iraq and Syria, and energy experts forecast Syrian oil production can make 6-7 million barrels daily in the future, possibly placing fourth in the world in terms of its gas reserves.

For China, concerned about Chinese Uyghur militants joining international terror groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda affiliates in Syria and Iraq, Beijing prefers to support Assad and prevent Damascus from falling into the hands of ISIS or Sunni-Islamist regimes that will export terrorists to Xinjiang and attack Chinese territory. As

<sup>1</sup> See also: Paul Richter, “Iran seeks quick relief from U.N. sanctions in nuclear talks”, in: LA Times eNewspaper, November 15, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-iran-nuclear-talks-20141114-story.html>

<sup>2</sup> See also: “Iran’s accession to SCO real – Russian FM”, in: Trend News Agency, January 21, 2015, <http://en.trend.az/iran/nuclearp/2355535.html>

<sup>3</sup> See also: Thomas Grove, “Russia may send S-300 missile system to Iran - media”, in: Reuters News Agency, January 20, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/20/us-russia-iran-missiles-idUSKBN0KT1K420150120>

such some Russian pundits recommended bringing Syria into the SCO fold<sup>4</sup> to better stabilize Damascus and battle Islamic extremists, and indeed in 2013, Assad had expressed his desire to join the SCO.

### **CSTO security umbrella for Iran?**

Iran is also eyeing membership in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). CSTO has a mutual defense treaty clause whereby attack against one is considered an attack against all, with membership consisting of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus and Armenia.

Back in May 2007, CSTO secretary general Nicolai Bordyuzha invited Iran to join the military alliance, stating that, “the CSTO is an open organization. If Iran applies in accordance with our charter, we will consider the application.” In June 2007, the Iranian military was so apprehensive about the threat of an Israeli airstrike on its nuclear installations that a Revolutionary Guards air defense unit fired a TOR-M1 surface-to-air missile at a civilian airliner. Indeed in September 2007 Israelis conducted an airstrike on a nuclear installation – but it was in Syria.

Now with war drums beating and prospects of Israelis conducting another airstrike on Iran’s nuclear installations, on 2 November 2014, speaking during Russian President Putin’s meeting with members of the CSTO Parliamentary Assembly, State Duma speaker Sergey Naryshkin suggested the CSTO consider admitting Iran as an observer.

But should the CSTO process tarry, Iran might fast track a possible security guarantee from its Eurasian allies through membership in the SCO. At the June 2014 SCO annual summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, the prospect of a SCO-CSTO merger was raised given most members overlap.



Iran as CSTO candidate

As the P5+1 meets again to decide on sanctions relief, it might be prudent for the world powers to consider the implications of removing the levee and potentially allowing Iran to join a military alliance to deter a future US/Israeli airstrike.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed are those of the author.

<sup>4</sup> See also: Andrew Korybko (USA), “The Case For Bringing Syria Into The SCO”, in: OrientalReview.org, January 26, 2015, <http://orientalreview.org/2015/01/26/the-case-for-bringing-syria-into-the-sco/>



### About the Author of this Issue

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