

Iran and the Middle East: Who's Afraid of Russia's S-300 Air Defense System?

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Global Research, April 17, 2015

[New Eastern Outlook](#)

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, Russia and FSU](#)

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The [executive order](#) issued by Russian President Vladimir Putin, which lifts the ban on the export of weapons systems to Iran, has been met with sharp condemnation by Israel, and admonishment from the United States. While Moscow has yet to make a final decision on if/when it will begin supplying the S-300 air defense missiles to Iran – Tehran purchased the system under a 2007 contract left unfulfilled by Russia as a result of the UN-imposed arms embargo – it is clear that the possibility alone signals a significant shift in the geopolitics of the region.

On the one hand, Iranian air defenses would be significantly upgraded with an advanced weapons system such as S-300 which, though not exactly new, is still very much capable of defending the country's airspace from any potential attack, be it Israeli or US. On the other hand, the possible delivery of the S-300s is a symbolic step towards integrating Iran into a broader non-NATO security architecture taking shape under the leadership of Russia and China.

While BRICS has come to be the watchword of multi-polarity, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has emerged as a military-security-intelligence alliance, on top of being an economic and political forum for Sino-Russian relations. The possibility of Iran joining this alliance both through participation in SCO summits, and in practice through military and non-military contracts as well as other forms of cooperation, signals a watershed both for Iran, and the non-western world. Where, just a few years ago, the US and its allies could dictate the terms of relations between Iran and other states, today it simply cannot, nuclear deal or no nuclear deal. The S-300s are only the tip of the iceberg.

What This Means for Iran and the Region

First and foremost, Iran is going to have the opportunity to exist, at least to some extent, on an equal footing on the international stage. Though it is still unclear the specifics of the finalized agreement, including the odious sanctions regime and the extent to which it will actually be lifted, what is certain is that Iran will have much more leeway to pursue economic cooperation with potential partners internationally.

Naturally, various propagandists from Washington to Tel Aviv have taken the opportunity to use Russia's move to lift the ban as a signal of the "disastrous" policy of "appeasement" by the Obama administration. [Commenting](#) on Russia's decision, Israeli intelligence and international relations minister Yuval Steinitz said that it was:

A direct result of the legitimacy that Iran is receiving from the nuclear deal that

is being prepared, and proof that the Iranian economic growth which follows the lifting of sanctions will be exploited for arming itself and not for the welfare of the Iranian people... Instead of demanding that Iran desist from the terrorist activity that it is carrying out in the Middle East and throughout the world, it is being allowed to arm itself with advanced weapons that will only increase its aggression.

Such comments are perhaps far more revealing than Mr. Steinitz might realize. The overt admission in his statement is that Israel sees Iranian *economic growth* as the true threat to Israel (read Israeli hegemony). In direct contradiction to the droning propaganda about Iran wanting to “wipe Israel from the map,” Steinitz here quite correctly, though perhaps inadvertently, admits that Iran’s economic potential is what makes it a regional threat. While he includes the obligatory references to Iranian “terrorist activity” and “aggression,” Steinitz provides a window into the thinking of Israeli strategic planners who see in Iran a potential economic powerhouse that would lure western and non-western investment alike, not the least of which coming from western energy companies.

As [Bloomberg](#) noted in late March on the eve of the framework agreement, “[Iran] is emerging again as a potential prize for Western oil companies such as BP, Royal Dutch Shell Plc, Eni SpA and Total SA. The Chinese can also be expected to enter the race, while U.S. companies, more burdened by sanctions and legacy, will be further down the pack...‘Iran is the big prize...The resource size is very attractive.’” Seen from this perspective, both the US and Israel stand to be major losers from the nuclear deal as Iran is allowed to pursue critical investment from international partners.

But the issue is not merely about investment, for if it were, Israel and the US would likely be able to control the debate. Instead, Russia’s potential delivery of the S-300s changes the strategic calculus for Washington and Tel Aviv, as their principal leverage – the threat of the use of force ranging from limited air strikes to all out war – will be considerably weakened, if not totally nullified. For, while Steinitz and others may talk of “advanced weapons that will only increase [Iran’s] aggression,” they know perfectly well that S-300s are defensive weapons whose function is to protect the integrity of a given country’s airspace from either missiles or aircraft. In this way, Israel and the US are far more concerned about losing their strategic advantage than they are of any aggressive posture from Iran.

There is still more for the US and Israel to be concerned about, namely what Iran might be able to do with increased military and technological cooperation with Russia. It could provide Iran the opportunity to up their material and technical support for Syria and Hezbollah in the continued fight against ISIS and Al Qaeda throughout the region. This of course would be disastrous to the regime change agenda of the US-NATO-GCC-Israel in Syria which, despite more than four years of an internationally orchestrated and supported terrorist war, shows no signs of capitulating. Taken in total, the S-300s would both symbolically and concretely alter the balance of power in the region.

The Geopolitical Significance

One should be careful not to understate the importance of this move by Russia. Aside from the obvious strategic importance such a defensive weapons system holds for a besieged country like Iran, there is the symbolic importance internationally. From all indications Russia and Iran are moving considerably closer, as evidenced by the recent [military](#)

[cooperation agreement](#) signed by the defense ministers of the two countries.

Russia and Iran have a number of issues of mutual interest, from questions regarding the conflict in Syria, to Caspian region resources and security, to energy exports and world markets. Such complex international issues require not only close cooperation, but a mutually beneficial understanding in a variety of spheres; that is precisely what worries the US and Israel above all. But, unfortunately for Washington and Tel Aviv, the integration of Iran into a non-western, multi-polar order goes far deeper.

The emerging potential for [Iran's entry](#) to the Russia-China led SCO would fundamentally alter the balance of power in Asia, especially in light of the growing consensus that both Pakistan and India will also [join the SCO](#). Such a development would see a new power bloc in Asia, one that includes the economic and military power of China and Russia, with the emerging economy of India and, to a lesser degree, Pakistan: both military powers in their own right.

It is self-evident the degree to which such an alliance represents a threat, let alone a counterweight, to the decades-long hegemony of NATO and its proxies. Coupled with the emergence of the economic institutions associated with the BRICS – the BRICS Development Bank, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) – which could provide a much needed alternative to the US-EU dominated IMF and World Bank, the contours of a new economic and military order become more apparent.

While of course all of these important developments are far beyond the simple lifting of the ban on S-300s to Iran, they are connected. For, as Iran becomes a viable military and trading partner for Russia, it becomes more integrated into the global political and economic system. Today, it may simply be a defensive missile system, but the potential tomorrow is boundless. Planners in Moscow and Tehran understand this, as do those in Tel Aviv and Washington. For this reason, S-300s are far more than missiles: they are the symbol of a multi-polar future.

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