

Russia threatens to supply Iran with top new missile system as 'cold war' escalates

Contributed by Philip Sherwell in New York and William Lowther in Washington
Sunday, 31 August 2008

Russia is deploying the threat to sell a "game changing" air defence system to Iran as a high stakes bargaining chip in its new "cold war" with America, The Sunday Telegraph has learned.

US intelligence fears the Kremlin will supply the sophisticated S-300 system to Tehran if Washington pushes through Nato membership for its pro-Western neighbours Georgia and Ukraine.

The proposed deal is causing huge alarm in the US and Israel as the S-300 can track 100 targets at once and fire on planes up to 75 miles away.

That would make it a "game-changer", greatly improving Iranian defences against any air strike on its nuclear sites, according to Pentagon adviser Dan Goure. "This is a system that scares every Western air force," he said.

Senior US intelligence operatives believe that Russia is planning to use a stand-off over the S-300 to create a foreign policy showdown that would test the mettle of a new US president.

Republican candidate John McCain has taken a strongly anti-Kremlin line on a series of international issues and backed Georgia's desire to join Nato. His Democratic rival Barack Obama has also indicated he supports Nato membership for Georgia.

"The message from Moscow is very clear," said George Friedman, director of Stratfor, a leading US private intelligence agency. "They are saying if you don't stop meddling in our sphere of influence, this is what we are going to do.

"Back Georgia and Ukraine for Nato membership and you'll see the S-300 to Iran. It is a very powerful bargaining chip and a major deterrent to US actions in the region. Moscow is playing very strategically on America's obsession with Iran."

Moscow has been infuriated by the steady encroachment of Nato into the former Soviet bloc and the recent granting of independence to the ex-Serbian province of Kosovo against its wishes.

After American condemnation of Russia's foray into Georgia, Moscow invited Syria's dictator Bashar al-Assad, a long-time US foe, to discuss military deals in a deliberate signal of how it could cause trouble for Washington.

A senior US intelligence operative who recently returned from the Middle East said Russia is believed to have struck a tentative deal to sell the S-300 to the Islamic regime. There are reports that Russia has already moved some basic components for the system to its close ally Belarus, ready for possible transfer to Iran.

"Moscow cannot simply threaten to strike the deal," the official told The Sunday Telegraph. "Iran certainly thinks it has a deal. And the Israelis believe that a deal has been reached but that they can still block it."

The outgoing Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert is expected to pass that message on to his counterpart Vladimir Putin and President Dmitri Medvedev when he visits Moscow next month. Israel has already ended military assistance to Georgia in an effort to placate Russia.

Russia has denied previous assertions by senior Iranians that a deal has already been finalised on the S-300.

Dan Goure, a long-time Pentagon adviser, said: "If Tehran obtained the S-300, it would be a game-changer in military thinking for tackling Iran. That could be a catalyst for Israeli air attacks before it's operational."

Dr Friedman said that if it became operational, it would effectively rule out Israeli air raids and seriously complicate any US aerial bombardment.

The system would take up to a year to become operational. In the meantime, Israel would come under heavy domestic pressure to launch an attack on Iranian nuclear plants, which the West believes are part of a secret atomic weapons programme but which Tehran claims are for civilian energy.

A senior Iranian military commander warned yesterday that any attack on Iran would start a major conflict. "Any

aggression against Iran will start a world war," deputy chief of staff for defence publicity, Brigadier General Masoud Jazayeri, said in a statement. "The unrestrained greed of the US leadership and global Zionism... is gradually leading the world to the edge of a precipice."

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/2651516/Russia-threatens-to-supply-Iran-with-top-new-missile-system-as-cold-war-escalates.html>