

Mistrust Dogs Russia-Iran Arms Talks as Shoigu Heads for Tehran

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Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu traveled to Tehran on Monday to discuss increasing defense cooperation and arms trade with the Islamic republic, but analysts said Russia's failure to honor several past contracts would continue to dog Russian-Iranian defense relations.

Despite being Russia's first acting defense minister in 15 years to visit Tehran, very little has been said officially about Shoigu's agenda for the visit. However, the Iranian embassy in Moscow told the Interfax news agency on Friday that Shoigu will "hold full-scale negotiations with his counterpart [Hossein Dehghan]."

But any negotiations on future arms sales to Tehran will be impeded by the elephant in the room — Moscow's failure to make good on an \$800 million contract for the delivery of five S-300 air-defense systems, analysts told The Moscow Times.

The sale was halted in 2010 by then-President Dmitry Medvedev, who was worried that the delivery would tarnish Russia's image at a time when the United Nations was imposing sanctions on Tehran to pressure it into abandoning its nuclear ambitions.

S-300s, capable of tracking up to 100 targets while engaging 12 at a range of 120 kilometers, would raise the cost of an Israeli airstrike against Iranian nuclear facilities, an option considered by the Israeli and U.S. military planners.

The move was widely seen both in Russia and abroad as a concession to the West, which felt threatened by the prospect of Iranian nuclear weapons.

But because of Moscow's falling out with the West over Ukraine last year, some have said that Russia may now consider defying the Iran sanctions and selling the weapons — something Tehran has been lobbying for.

"Tehran is still making attempts to persuade Moscow to resume delivery of the S-300 missile systems," said Yury Barmin, a Russian defense analyst based in the United Arab Emirates, in emailed comments Monday.

Although the sale was suspended, Iran considers the contract active, and has even filed lawsuits against Russia. The cases have not progressed, and Iran says they can withdraw them if the deliveries are made.

Recent sanctions against Russia have driven the two countries closer together, Barmin said, "and Iran may be thinking that the resumption of the S-300 deal may be an effective way [for Russia] to retaliate [against the West]."

But Ruslan Pukhov, director of the Center for the Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST) and a member of the Defense Ministry's public advisory board, told *The Moscow Times* by phone that he could not see how Russia could acquiesce on the S-300s.

"Russia has a secret obligation to Israel not to deliver S-300s to either Iran or Syria. This will be a major obstacle [for the development of arms trade between Russia and Iran] because the Iranians have made their position clear — either deliver the S-300s or get lost," Pukhov said.

But Moscow's problems in the field of arms sales to Tehran run much deeper than recent spats over the S-300 systems and Russian support for UN sanctions against Iran for its nuclear ambitions.

Russia first scorned Iran at the West's behest in the late 1990s, when Moscow enacted a series of protocols formulated by the bilateral Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission in 1995 ending the sale of Russian-made offensive weapons to Tehran.

A Difficult History

Although Shoigu may be able to facilitate the development of non-lethal hardware — such as radar systems sold by Russia's largest defense contractor, Almaz-Antey — a breakthrough in arms sales to Iran will likely evade him until Russia can demonstrate to Tehran that it is capable of honoring contracts.

The Soviet Union was a major supplier of weapons to Iran, both before and after the 1979 Islamic revolution, which saw a pro-U.S. regime toppled in favor of a hard-line anti-Western Islamic government.

But Moscow's supply of offensive equipment — such as powerful T-72 tanks — took back seat to the post-Cold War reconciliation between Russia and the U.S.

One of the stipulations of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission agreements was for Russia to cease supplying offensive weapons — particularly missile technology — to Iran. Russia was given until 2000 to complete existing contracts, and relinquished the right to sign any future contracts.

When 2000 came, from 50 to 70 percent of those contracts remained unfulfilled, losing at least \$4 billion for Russia, according to CAST. Iran found itself without hundreds of armored vehicles and several submarines as a result.

Since the visit of former Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev, shortly after the Gore-Chernomyrdin protocols came into effect, no sitting defense minister has made the trip — evidence of a serious rift in Russian-Iranian military, if not diplomatic, relations.

As Pukhov explained, "if you are a big country with neighbors that have substantial and important armed forces, you should visit each other to build transparency and trust. It is very strange that you visit 'hostile Poland' more frequently than 'friendly Iran'."

After being snubbed again by Medvedev in 2010, "the Iranians feel betrayed and humiliated by the Russians because they twice failed to keep their word, so I am pessimistic for the prospects of the Russia-Iran arms trade," he said.

Beyond Arms Sales

Although Russia and Iran may have mistrust to overcome, arms sales are only one element of bilateral relations. In other areas, particularly military cooperation in the form of joint exercises, both sides have significant interest in working together.

Interfax reported on Monday that Shoigu is expected to sign a memorandum of understanding for the organization of more joint exercises with Iran's military. Already the two have brought their naval forces closer together in the Caspian Sea, an area where both Moscow and Iran wish to keep the U.S.-led NATO alliance from establishing a presence, according to Barmin.

The five Caspian states — Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan — signed a decree in September claiming exclusive right to maintain a military presence in the area.

"They believe that this declaration effectively bans NATO from the Caspian," Barmin said.

Pukhov said Russia could learn a great deal from Iran, which has been under almost constant sanctions since the 1979 revolution: "The Iranians have a lot to offer Russians in terms of learning to operate a military and defense industry in virtual isolation," he said.

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