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Off the Pitch: Cooperation, Warnings Follow Saudi Arabia in Russia

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Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak and Saudi Energy Minister Khalid al-Falih have agreed to expand cooperation in the oil and gas sector, Russia's ministry said in a statement after their meeting in Moscow.

Novak and Falih also agreed to work towards a comprehensive bilateral agreement.

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Meanwhile, President Donald Trump's nominee for a top State Department Middle East post said on Thursday he would dissuade countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Egypt from weapons deals with Russia that could trigger U.S. sanctions.

"I would work with our allies to dissuade them, or encourage them, to avoid military

purchases that would be potentially sanctionable," David Schenker, the nominee to be Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, said at his Senate confirmation hearing.

"In other words, I would tell Saudi Arabia not to do it," he said.

Senator Bob Menendez, the top Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, had asked Schenker whether he agreed that reported purchases of Russia's S-400 surface-to-air missile systems by Saudi Arabia and Qatar would trigger U.S. sanctions under a sweeping sanctions law that Congress passed overwhelmingly last year.

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Menendez also asked Schenker about reports that Egypt planned to buy 50 fighter jets and 46 helicopters from Russia.

"These entities who are our allies must understand that under U.S. law ... the purchases of such systems ultimately are sanctionable and we will press very hard on the question of pursuing those sanctions should they choose to do so, and I hope you'll communicate that in your role," Menendez said.

"Absolutely, senator," Schenker answered.

The sanctions law was passed last year to strike back at Moscow for actions including meddling in the 2016 U.S. election, its aggression in Ukraine and involvement in the Syrian civil war. Among its provisions is a bar on significant transactions with the Russian defense industry.

Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have reportedly been in talks to buy the S-400. But Riyadh reportedly threatened military action against Doha if it went ahead with a deal to buy the systems, prompting Qatar to accuse Saudi Arabia of "feckless behavior" that is tearing apart the pro-Western Gulf bloc.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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