

I Sing of Arms and Iran

Casey Stengel, sometimes reputed as the greatest 20th-century American philosopher, is reported to have asked a simple but critical question: "Can't anybody here play this game?" He was apparently referring not to the Obama administration's Middle East policy, but to the ineffectiveness and hapless performance of the New York Mets, the team he was managing.

President Barack Obama stated in an interview in *Vox* on January 23, 2015 that the goal of any good foreign policy "is having a vision and aspirations and ideals, but also recognizing the world as it is, where it is, and figuring out how you tack to the point where things are better than they were before."

It is obvious that the United States does not have solutions to every problem in the 21st century. However, the urgent issue at the moment is whether Obama is accurately recognizing the state of relations of the United States and its five allies with Iran, and the likelihood of successful negotiations between the parties.

The dramatic decision on April 13, 2015 by Russian President Vladimir V. Putin to deliver to Iran the S-300, the most advanced air defense missile system, believed to be the Russian version of the U.S. Patriot missile system, has come as an unwelcome surprise to the White House. Putin's action is a direct confrontational challenge to the U.S. and to the international concern to limit Iran's nuclear program. The missile system, which has different versions with different capabilities, is intended to protect the country against rockets, missiles, and aircraft.

This arms sale, in addition to being a very public projection of Russian power and disregard for the views of the United States administration, is also likely to be the forerunner of

business deals, including arms supplies, between other countries and Iran. Putin's decision comes at a moment when President Obama has said he would sign a compromise bill giving Congress the opportunity to review and respond to the final text of the multinational negotiations between the P5+1 powers and Iran on the latter's nuclear facilities. Thus, the U.S. Senate will vote on legislation to approve any agreement with Iran.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said that the delivery of the advanced weaponry was being made "given the progress in talks on Iran's nuclear program." This statement suggests that the arms deal is the direct result of the legitimacy Iran has obtained from the publication of two documents on April 2, 2015. One is a document that the U.S. State Department has called "The Framework Agreement." The other is a declaration issued by the Iranian foreign minister, Mohammed Javad Zarif. To this date there is a contradiction between the documents and declared intentions.



The position of U.S. Secretary State John Kerry is that there will be a phased removal of sanctions imposed against Iran after an agreement has been reached. In contradiction, the Iranian leaders – Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Hassan Rouhani, and foreign minister Zarif – have all demanded that all sanctions, economic and financial, imposed on Iran be lifted on the day of a final agreement, and that there will not be an agreement if this removal of sanctions is not accomplished. They have specified that this position is non-negotiable.

In addition, the Iranian leaders insist that Iranian military sites will be off limits to inspectors. Already it is clear that the lifting of sanctions, demanded by the Iranian leaders, will not only help the Iranian economy in general, but also provide financial resources to strengthen its

military machine and sponsorship of terrorism.

The possession of the S-300 weapon system by Iran will clearly have at least two consequences. First, it is likely to make Iran a more aggressive power. It will make any air strike by Israel or the United States against an Iranian defense system more difficult, if not impossible. Second, in the event of no agreement on Iran's nuclear activity, the use of military force to halt further development may not be feasible.

The arms deal, worth \$800 million, was first signed in 2007, but the sale was suspended, partly because of international pressure from the United States and Israel and partly because of the embargo on arms transfers to Iran imposed by the U.N. Security Council in 2010. Though that embargo is technically still in effect, the Russians will now deliver S-300 missile system, five squadrons, with missiles that have a range of 93 miles and can fire at multiple targets flying up to 90,000 feet. Russia has offered Iran an even more advanced system, but no agreement has been reached. Russia is also negotiating a \$20-billion oil-for-goods agreement with Iran.

The missiles clearly pose a threat to the State of Israel, especially if they are given by Iran to Hezb'allah, Hamas, or Syrian president Assad. All three, as well as Iran, are capable of striking deep inside the State of Israel. Hamas has already been receiving from Iran heavy machinery and engineering tools that it has been rapidly using to reconstruct tunnels that will allow attacks from the Gaza Strip into Israel, as well as supplying an arsenal of rockets with which to make those attacks. Iran has also been arming members of Hamas who are resident in the West Bank.

The specious answer by the Russian president and foreign minister to criticism of its action is that the S-300 system has only defense capabilities, that it is not designed for attacks, and that it does not pose a threat to the security of any country in the Middle East, including Israel. The arms

sale, the foreign minister said, will stimulate a constructive process of the talks on Iran's nuclear program. What was left unsaid by Lavrov, whose cynical humor is not always fully understood by Western interlocutors, is that if the negotiations fail, Iran will resume its nuclear program and also have the advanced S-300 system.

Once again, the resurgent Russian nationalism of President Putin has manifested in an aggressive policy to exert power and influence through military actions not only in Eastern Ukraine, in Crimea, and in the Donbas region, but also elsewhere in the world, including the Middle East. Control of Crimea, allowing expansion of its Black Sea fleet, provides Russia with a platform for its projection of power, as a forward operating base with mobile ballistic missile systems, capable of air defense and surface attack.

General Philip Breedlove, NATO supreme allied commander, on February 25, 2015 called for the United States and its allies to respond to Russia's offensive campaign, diplomatically and economically if not militarily. These countries must also counter, by similar means and the effective use of informational tools, the danger of an Iran being armed with advanced weapons. Finally, they must recognize the fallacy of removing sanctions imposed on Iran.

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