

Kazakhstan is Russia's most expensive military ally

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On 31 January during Russian defence minister Sergei Shoigu's visit to Kazakhstan, details of the functioning of a joint regional air defence system were agreed upon. Russia took the largest part of responsibility for the modernisation of Kazakhstan's air defence – Kazakhstan will receive free of charge the armament for five divisions with S-300PS anti-missile and anti-ballistic air defence systems which will replace the obsolete armament from Soviet times.

Russia and Kazakhstan signed the agreement on the establishment of a joint regional air defence system in January 2013 but it was not until the turn of December 2013 and January 2014 that the way it would be implemented was agreed upon.

Commentary

- The joint regional air defence system of Kazakhstan and Russia is the second structure of this kind in the territory of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – since 2009 a similar Belarusian-Russian system has been in operation and a further one between Armenia and Russia is being developed. The establishment of regional systems based on bilateral agreements, independent of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Joint CIS Air Defence System which still exists on paper, in fact gives Moscow control over issues connected with the defence of the air space of their signatories.
- The transfer of S-300 systems free of charge should be seen as Russia's investment in keeping Kazakhstan in Russia's defence space. In recent years Astana, being aware of its financial capacities, despite its membership in the CSTO has been pursuing a policy of diversifying armament supplies and military equipment, thus loosening the hold Russia has on it. The fact that Kazakhstan has abandoned this policy (apart from the establishment of the common regional air defence system in 2013, Astana and Moscow have signed a host of other agreements which strengthen ties between the two countries' defence systems) has been dictated first of all by the fact that its government is fearful of the development of the situation in the region after the NATO military operation in Afghanistan is completed and, secondly, by the lack of commitment on the part of the remaining partners in military co-operation – China and the US. Russia's concessions in non-military issues has also been important, above all Moscow's agreement to the further joint use of the Baikonur Cosmodrome (Kazakhstan is unable to use it on its own; there are no other interested parties that could replace Russia, which is building a new

cosmodrome in the Far East).

- The decision to pass a large number of relatively modern armament systems to Kazakhstan free of charge (if Russian standards are adopted it will be 40 S-300 systems) reveals the asymmetry in relations between Russia and its individual allies. This positions Kazakhstan as Russia's most important ally within the CIS territory (Astana would be able to fund the modernisation of its air defence system alone). The relations between Russia and Kazakhstan in the area of military and technical co-operation can be contrasted with analogous relations between Russia and Belarus. They confirm Belarus's status as an object of Russia's policy; despite financial problems, Russia has forced it to co-fund the modernisation of its air defence system (Minsk has covered at least part of the costs of the S-300 systems supplied by Russia).