

Russia is undermining the nuclear agreement with Iran

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On 13 April President Vladimir Putin signed a decree which makes it possible to export Russian S-300 long range *surface-to-air missile* systems to Iran. While explaining this decision, foreign minister Sergey Lavrov stated Russia had banned these exports to Iran in 2010 exclusively as a gesture of good will made in order to facilitate the negotiations about Iran's nuclear programme. According to Lavrov, the Russian embargo was tougher than the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council in June 2010 and the agreements signed by Iran and the "group of six" (the US, Russia, the UK, France, China and Germany) on 2 April remove the primary reason for it to be in place. It was imposed in September 2010 by the then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev who blocked the contract signed in 2007 to supply five divisions of the S-300-PMU1 anti-aircraft missile system worth approximately US\$ 800 million to Iran. Similarly, on 13 April Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov declared that Russia and Iran were implementing the agreement they had agreed in August 2014 regarding a barter exchange of Russian agricultural and industrial products for Iranian oil. However, this has not been confirmed by either Iranian sources or the Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak.

Commentary

- Russia has responded to the emerging prospect of a compromise solution to Iran's nuclear programme by deciding to withdraw from the embargo imposed on supplies of missile systems to Iran and announcing that it has been pursuing the barter transaction with Iran. The response is motivated by Russia's concern that the solution of the Iran's nuclear problem means Iran would break out of its international isolation and Russia would thus lose its position of privileged trading, military and political partner. The nuclear agreement would make it possible for Iran to sell its oil and natural gas to Western markets, which would affect Russia's economic interests. This would also weaken Russia's bargaining power in its relations with Washington which would no longer need to seek co-operation with Russia on the issue of Iran.
- Moscow has declared it is satisfied with the fact that a framework agreement has been reached between Iran and the "group of six". However, the comments made by Russian diplomats and the logic behind Russia's position on the key issue at this stage of the negotiations – the schedule of lifting international sanctions imposed on Iran - suggest that Moscow is unhappy. The fact that Russia has supported Teheran's demands to lift the sanctions immediately, going against the position of the Western member states of

the “group of six”, diminishes the chances of Iran making concessions in this area and thus the chances of reaching a final agreement.

- The measures undertaken by Russia strengthen opponents of the compromise both in Iran and the US and thus increase the likelihood of the agreement being rejected; and this is in fact Moscow’s objective. The announcements made by Russian diplomats about launching barter transactions with Iran have a similar objective and they are also intended to serve as a warning for Washington that Russia is ready to make it possible for Iran to circumvent the Western oil embargo. This attempt to derail the agreement with Iran is also a blow dealt against US President Barack Obama as this agreement is intended to become the major international success of his presidency.