In recent years, the United Arab Emirates (the UAE) became an important partner for Russia in the Middle East by choosing to support Russian Federation’s military actions in Syria in 2015. Owing to increasing mutual trust and the need to cooperate on security, Russia and the UAE began to strengthen their cooperation in the military and technical sphere.

The collaboration between the Russian Federation and the Emirates in this sector began as far back as the 1990s, when the United Arab Emirates began to purchase Russia’s BMP-3 military vehicles and other armored equipment in fairly large numbers. In 2006, an agreement on military and technical cooperation came into effect between the two nations, which has resulted in a legislative order in this sphere of collaboration between the Russian Federation and the UAE. In the period from 2009 to 2013, Russia supplied the UAE with 50 Pantsir-S1 missile systems, worth $800 million.

The main platform that the Russian Federation uses to showcase its military products to the UAE is the International Defense Conference & Exhibition (IDEX), which takes place in the capital of the Emirates, Abu-Dhabi, once in two years. It is the largest event of its kind in the Middle East, and one of the biggest military exhibitions in the world. Russian state company Rosoboronexport, which specializes on export of products for military-industrial complexes, is among the most permanent and prominent exhibitors at this event. In addition, the Russian Federation invariably displays its military and civil aircraft at the Dubai Airshow, an aerospace exhibition also held once every two years in
As previously mentioned, recently the state of Russian-UAE military and technical cooperation (MTC) was nudged forward by the support, demonstrated by the United Arab Emirates towards the Russian Federation, when the latter began its fight against terrorist units in Syria in autumn of 2015. The IDEX exhibition, which is always held in February-March, had already taken place that year. However, the following IDEX-2017 exhibition, which took place in February 2017, was marked by a number of noteworthy events. During this exposition, Russia and the Emirates signed an agreement on promoting cooperation in the sphere of manufacturing of military and technical products, and a contract on supplying the UAE with anti-tank missiles, priced at more than $700 million. Both nations also expressed their intention to begin a joint collaboration on developing a new 5th generation fighter aircraft. At that time, the two countries also signed a memorandum of intent expressing UAE’s desire to buy a consignment of Russia’s Sukhoi Su-35s, which are multi-functional supermaneuverable fighter aircraft. The contract on the purchase of the jets has not been signed as yet, but the negotiations are ongoing.

In February 2019, exhibition IDEX-2019 was held. Companies from 60 countries participated in the event. Russia was represented by Rosoboronexport, Kalashnikov Concern, Concern VKO “Almaz-Antey”, scientific and industrial complex UralVagonZavod and dozens of other companies. Many of these enterprises gained world-wide fame a long time ago. During IDEX-2019, by and large, these companies showcased approximately 1,000 of their products. Around 200 of these items were promising novelties, and some of these goods were displayed to an international audience for the first time. Visitors to the exhibition were able to see various models of the AK-200 family (Kalashnikov assault rifles); the T-90MC battle tank; the Pantsir-ME air defense system for ships; self-propelled artillery system Floks, which is highly mobile and capable of using various types of ammunition; unmanned kamikaze drone KUB-BLA, and many other products. Models and mockups of military products were displayed for all to see under the roof of the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre. However, visitors had a chance to see many of these exhibits “in action” during shooting practices in special training areas.

As always, Russian products generated a lot of interest among military personnel from the UAE and other nations. During the exhibition, representatives from the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation (FSMTC) and from other administrative bodies of the Russian Federation discussed all the promising MTC areas with their UAE partners. In addition, they continued negotiations on the previously mentioned joint project on developing a fighter jet. The parties signed a number of contracts, worth approximately $128 million. Besides, the UAE purchased a consignment of anti-tank guided missiles Kornet-E, and signed an agreement on after sales services and spare parts delivery for this equipment with their Russian counterparts. In addition, a contract on repair and modernization of Russian Pantsir-S1 missile systems, which the UAE already has, and on spare parts supply for this equipment was concluded. An agreement on modernizing a fleet of BMP-3s, which already belongs to the UAE military and includes approximately 1,000 of these infantry fighting vehicles, was also signed. This equipment has become very popular among UAE servicemen because of its reliability, ease of repair and superior combat features. Furthermore, the Emirates purchased a sizable batch of ammunition for its BMP-3s.

It is worth noting that in comparison to 2017, the outcomes from IDEX-2019 may seem fairly modest for Russia’s arms export sphere. However, military and technical cooperation is not simply an area of business, in which success is measured in dollar amounts from signed contracts. When nations exchange technologies in the area of national security, it is a demonstration of a high degree of trust and mutual support between these countries, not only in economic but also political spheres. Considering the recent shift towards closer ties between Russia and the UAE, it is too early to expect too much progress in such a sensitive sphere as military and technical cooperation. Nonetheless, the two nations are already engaged in a joint project to develop a fighter aircraft, which in and of itself may be viewed as a substantial accomplishment for the sphere of Russian-UAE MTC. The fact is that the UAE and other countries in this region, as a rule, purchase military aircraft from the West. The Emirates’ military has been armed with French Mirage 2000s and U.S. F-16s for quite some time. Experts in the aviation sphere say that retraining its pilots to fly completely different aircraft, and its engineers and mechanics to maintain new equipment is very difficult as well as expensive. Hence, the fact that the UAE is actually considering buying Russia’s fighter jets Sukhoi Su-35, and developing a new military aircraft in collaboration with the Russian Federation may signal some fairly significant changes in UAE’s military and political course. It is possible that from the Emirates’ perspective, these actions are indicative of their recognition of Russia as an important new force in the Middle East, which the UAE will have to cooperate with for many years to come. And owing to this potential collaboration, the UAE has begun to revamp its defense systems so that similar armaments of the two nations will enable the Emirates and the Russian Federation to better coordinate their actions. It is also worth noting that a modern defense system requires a high degree of cooperation between different types of armed units. Integration in terms of technology is, therefore,
also a must. This means that once the UAE purchases Russian fighter jets, the Emirates may require Russian antiaircraft defense systems, among other things.

Hence, the military and technical cooperation between the Emirates and the Russian Federation is, in reality, demonstrating great success, as is the case with the UAE-Russian relationship on the whole. And these developments are helping the Russian Federation to consolidate its position in the Middle East.

*Dmitry Bokarev, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*