Will Qatar Start Buying Russia's S-400?

Recently Saudi Arabia has expressed its concern over the negotiations, taking place between Moscow and Doha, on the purchase of the missile system S-400. According to the French newspaper Le Monde, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia threatened to retaliate militarily if Qatar proceeds with the purchase of the S-400 missile system. The King of Saudi Arabia Salman bin Abdulaziz sent a message to the French President Emmanuel Macron expressing his “deep concern” about the negotiations on Qatar’s purchase of the Russian missile defense system. The King thinks that the presence of the S-400 system in Qatar will have an adverse effect on Saudi Arabia’s airspace security and will risk escalating tensions in the region.

Moscow reacted to the article in the French newspaper Le Monde, not via official channels but on a parliamentary level, with Alexei Kondratyev, Deputy Chair of the Federation Council Committee on Defense and Security, stating that Riyadh’s position will have no bearing on Moscow’s plan to supply Doha with the S-400 missile system. Kondratyev added “In supplying Qatar with S-400 Russia is pursuing its interests by earning funds to replenish the state budget. Saudi Arabia’s viewpoint is irrelevant and Russia won’t alter its plans.” He equated the statement, made by the King of Saudi Arabia, to use force against Qatar if it purchases S-400 to blackmail. “Clearly, Riyadh has dominated the region, thus increasing Qatar’s military might with the aid of the Russian S-400 systems benefits Doha. Hence the tensions experienced by Saudi Arabia are understandable” Kondratyev said. He is convinced that the US influence is behind Riyadh’s position on Qatar’s purchase of Russian systems, because Washington does not want to lose “a piece of the pie” on the regional arms market and thus, continues to exert pressure on Saudi Arabia.
However, in reality, the situation somewhat differs from that described, which becomes clear on further analysis. It is worth restating that on 5 June 2017, Saudi Arabia along with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain imposed trade and political sanctions on Qatar. It blocked the country’s only land border, and cut off the main route that supplies food and building materials to Qatar. In addition, the four aforementioned nations expelled Qatari citizens from their territories and encouraged its own citizens, residing in Qatar, to leave. Furthermore, they prohibited Qatari planes from using their airspace and also began to actively support exiled Qataris, who oppose the ruling regime.

As far as the purchase of the missile system S-400 is concerned, unfortunately, Riyadh has fallen for the Qatari ruse of yet again playing the “Russian trump”. The reality is that the Qatari military has traditionally purchased its supplies only from Western countries, and all the discussions about Qatar’s desire to buy the S-400 system from the Russian Federation, taking into account the fact that Qatar’s air force is comprised of only American, British and French military planes, is nonsense, which, unfortunately, the Kingdom took seriously. Starting with the second half of 2017, i.e. after the Arabic countries imposed sanctions on Qatar, Doha signed a number of contracts on purchasing Western military hardware and arms. The contract with the USA is for the purchase of 30 F-15 fighter aircraft, worth $12 billion, and that with the United Kingdom is for the supply of 24 fighter jets worth $5 billion.

So how can one make fighter planes made in the USA and Great Britain compatible with Russian air defense systems? The idea is absurd, but that is not the main point.

The fact remains that in exchange for the US “forgiveness” for Qatar’s direct involvement in global terrorism, Doha’s leaders agreed to host one of the biggest US air bases in Al Udeid (34 km from the country’s capital) 20 years ago. It is where the headquarters of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and the US Air Forces Central Command (609th Air Operations Center), Great Britain’s No. 83 Expeditionary Air Group RAF, and the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing of the USAF are stationed. This is the air base used by the US coalition in Syria to coordinate its efforts. Altogether there are approximately 10,000 US military personnel, including a special forces unit, whose aim is to defend Qatar if necessary. This is what happened during an attempted coup by a group of Qatari army leaders (note - on the night of 17 April 2012, the Emiri Guard started a revolt. The military tried to capture Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani’s palace. The Sheikh was abandoned by everyone but a special forces unit came to his aid. The US military clashed with the rebels and the coup failed. Still, the Qatari Sheikh and his wife Mozah bint Nasser, accompanied by the “commandos” left the palace in an American helicopter).

The air force in Qatar is primarily comprised of B-1B bombers and KC-135R refueling aircraft. In addition, 3 RC-135s and several cargo aircraft are stationed there. The air strip can accommodate up to 100 fighter jets. The base is equipped with modern communication and management systems. Two Patriot missile systems, stationed on the outskirts of the base, protect the military installation, and the missile launchers face North and East, respectively. And this is the crux of the matter, the US will never allow its de facto vassal state in the Persian Gulf, i.e. Qatar referred to by many Arabs as the “Exxon Mobil fuel burner”, to purchase a Russian missile defense system, especially, since it is more advanced than the Patriot missile system. Otherwise, Russian military personnel will gain control (at least during the S-400 system installation and subsequent training of the local military staff) not only over the air base Al Udeid, but also Saudi Arabia’s and UAE’s air space, even in areas where oil is extracted.

Despite Qatari leadership’s opportunism, Doha is not full of idiots, after all the state’s security and Al Thani family’s stay in power depend on the US and not on Russia. And if Qataris stop playing by American rules, the regime can be easily replaced, as there are only 6,000 people in Qatar’s air force while police and security forces are just 5,000 strong. All Washington needs to do is allow one Saudi military unit to enter Qatar. An even simpler solution is to use a soft coup to replace the current Sheikh with a new one, as before, when in June 2015, the current ruler’s father voluntarily abdicating his throne in favor of his son. For now, the US presents the only obstacle that prevents Riyadh and Abu Dhabi from deposing the current Sheikh and his cabinet from the position of power. So far, there have been no signals from the White House, but they are expected, especially if Doha announces its intention to purchase S-400 from Russia.

Surprisingly, Riyadh, as well as some others, do not comprehend this. Qatar has fooled Moscow on many occasions by promising to invest over $10 billion in the Russian economy after the visits by the former Sheikh, Hamad, and ex Prime Minister, H. bin Jassim, to Russia in 2010. So far Qatar has not sent a single cent. Trade volumes between the two countries barely reach $60 million instead of the proclaimed $500 million for 2017. Qatars, pressured by Exxon Mobil, have prevented Gazprom from participating in their gas field exploration, likewise Russian oil companies have not been granted access to Qatari oil fields. Moreover, it is worth recalling that, at present, Doha, with its liquefied natural gas (LNG), is Russia’s biggest rival on the world market for gas and stalls GECF’s (the Gas Exporting
Countries Forum; note equiv. to gas OPEC) efforts to effectively coordinate the activities of all the gas producing countries that are part of GECF. In addition, Qatar remains in a perpetual state of readiness to become part of the plans to supply gas via pipelines through Iran to Turkey and then to Europe, the only obstacle in its way is the war in Syria. Truth be told, Doha sparked this war in the hope of a new regime in Damascus, which would have allowed the passage of Qatar’s gas to Europe,

which is probably why Moscow refrained from issuing an official statement in response to Riyadh’s action towards the S-400 system. After all, agreements are already in place to supply these missile systems to Saudi Arabia. And from an economic perspective, first and foremost in terms of oil-based cooperation, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a more important partner to Russia than “the gas dwarf” Qatar (note - Arabs gave Qatar this nickname as a result of its grandiose political ambitions in the region despite its population of 300,000 and small size). At the end of the day, the OPEC+ deal was reached because of cooperation between Moscow and Riyadh and resulted in stabilization of oil prices and the ability to substantially raise them this year. All of this annoys the ambitious state of Qatar, which decided to drive a wedge between Russia and Saudi Arabia with its declarations about purchasing S-400.

It is highly likely that the arrival of Saudi Arabia’s crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman to Moscow for the World Cup 2018 will resolve the existing misunderstanding, especially since the fate of Qatar’s ruling regime is in jeopardy. Doha is yet to comply with the 13 requirements imposed on it by the Arabic nations as a pre-condition to lifting the sanctions. These requirements include the demands by Arabic countries for Doha to stop financially supporting the Sunni movement Muslim Brotherhood; close the Al Jazeera TV station, viewed by the Arabs as an incendiary channel; shut down the Turkish base stationed in Qatar, and decrease ties with Shiite Iran, an open enemy to Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE and Bahrain. It is also noteworthy that Qatar maintains close links both with radical Sunni movements (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood) as well as Iran, which plays the role of a leader to Shiite Muslims, despite the bloody conflict between the Sunnis and the Shiites raging in the Middle East for a number of years.

Hence Russia’s choice is crystal clear under the circumstances.

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