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Are Washington, Moscow, and Beijing Creating a New Cold War?

By Tom Engelhardt

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Imagine for a moment that in 2010, China's leaders had announced a long-term, up to $60 billion arms deal with an extreme Islamic fundamentalist regime in the Middle East, one that was notoriously repressive to women and a well-known supporter of the Taliban. Imagine as well that the first $30 billion part of that deal, involving 84 advanced jet fighters, was sealed in 2011, and that, since then, the sales have never stopped: several kinds of helicopters, artillery, armored personnel carriers, upgraded tanks, surface-to-air missile systems, even possibly a litoral combat vessel, among other purchases. Then include one more piece of information in the mix. In 2013, China added in "an advanced class of precision 'standoff munitions'" — missiles that could be fired from those previously purchased advanced jet fighters.

Given all this, we would know what to think. It would be just the sort of thing you might expect from an unscrupulous, retrograde communist regime with no values whatsoever, one willing above all else to keep the production lines of its weapons makers humming. Washington would long ago have denounced such dealings in no uncertain terms. In fact, such a scenario is utterly fantastic and essentially unimaginable — for China. But it happens to be a perfectly accurate description of the lucrative relationship that American arms makers and the Pentagon have with Saudi Arabia, a country Washington has promoted and sold weaponry to as if there were no tomorrow.

And that's just to dip a toe into the strange world of the global arms "trade," though in recent years it's become something closer to a U.S. monopoly in straightforward dollar

terms. Now, TomDispatch regular Michael Klare, author of *The Race for What's Left* and an expert on energy and also on that bizarre "trade," offers a glimpse into its latest grim set of wrinkles — new sales that might signal a twenty-first-century revival of the Cold War. *Tom*

The Cold War Redux?
Are Washington, Moscow, and Beijing Using the Global Arms Trade to Create a New Cold War?
By Michael T. Klare

Did Washington just give Israel the green light for a future attack on Iran via an arms deal? Did Russia just signal its further support for Bashar al-Assad's Syrian regime via an arms deal? Are the Russians, the Chinese, and the Americans all heightening regional tensions in Asia via arms deals? Is it possible that we're witnessing the beginnings of a new Cold War in two key regions of the planet — and that the harbingers of this unnerving development are arms deals?

International weapons sales have proved to be a thriving global business in economically tough times. According to the Congressional Research Service (CRS), such sales reached an impressive $85 billion in 2011, nearly double the figure for 2010. This surge in military spending reflected efforts by major Middle Eastern powers to bolster their armories with modern jets, tanks, and missiles — a process constantly encouraged by the leading arms manufacturing countries (especially the U.S. and Russia) as it helps keep domestic production lines humming. However, this familiar if always troubling pattern may soon be overshadowed by a more ominous development in the global arms trade: the revival of far more targeted Cold War-style weapons sales aimed at undermining rivals and destabilizing regional power balances. The result, inevitably, will be a more precarious world.

Arms sales have always served multiple functions. Valuable trade commodities, weapons can prove immensely lucrative for companies that specialize in making such products. Between 2008 and 2011, for example, U.S. firms sold $146 billion worth of military hardware to foreign countries, according to the latest CRS figures. Crucially, such sales help ensure that domestic production lines remain profitable even when government acquisitions slow down at home. But arms sales have also served as valuable tools of foreign policy — as enticements for the formation of alliances, expressions of ongoing support, and a way to lure new allies over to one's side. Powerful nations, seeking additional allies, use such sales to win the allegiance of weaker states; weaker states, seeking to bolster their defenses, look to arms deals as a way to build ties with stronger countries, or even to play one suitor off another in pursuit of the most sophisticated arms available.

Throughout the Cold War, both superpowers employed weapons transfers as a form of competition, offering advanced arms to entice regional powers to defect from each other's alliance systems or to counter offers made by the other side. Egypt, for example, was convinced to join the Soviet sphere in 1955 when provided with arms the West had refused to deliver. In the late 1970s, it moved back into the American camp after Washington anted up far better weapons systems.

In those years, the Americans and the Soviets also used arms transfers to bolster key allies in areas of strategic confrontation like the Middle East. Washington armed Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran when it was still ruled by the Shah; Russia armed Iraq and Syria. These transfers played a critical role in Cold War diplomacy and sometimes helped tilt the scales in favor of decisions to go to war. In the Yom Kippur War of 1973, for example, Egypt, emboldened by an expanded arsenal of Soviet antitank missiles, attacked Israeli forces in the Negev desert.

In the wake of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the commercial aspect of arms sales came to the fore. Both Washington and Moscow were, by then, far more interested in keeping their military production lines running than in jousting for advantage abroad, so emphasis was placed on scoring contracts from those with the means to pay — mainly the major oil producers of the Middle East and Latin America and the economically expansive "tigers" of Asia. Between 2008 and 2011, the CRS ranked the leading purchasers of conventional arms in the developing world this way: Saudi Arabia, India, the United Arab Emirates, Brazil, Egypt, and Venezuela. Together, these six countries ordered $117 billion in new weaponry.

Arms Sales Take a New Path

Only recently has some version of great power dueling and competition started up again, and in the early months of 2013 it seems to be gaining momentum. Several recent developments highlight this trend:

* In early May, Western intelligence sources revealed that Russia had supplied several batteries of advanced anti-ship cruise missiles to the embattled Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Moscow had previously provided the Syrians with a version of the missile known as the Yakhont, but those delivered recently are said to be equipped with a more advanced radar that increases their effectiveness. With those missiles, the Syrians should be in a better position to deter or counter any effort by international forces, including the United States, to aid anti-Assad rebels by sea or mount a naval blockade of Syria. They are also said to be negotiating with the Russians for the purchase of advanced S-300 ground-to-air missiles, a weapons system that would greatly complicate air attacks on the country or the imposition of a no-fly zone.

Aside from its military significance, the Yakhont transfer suggests a new inclination on Moscow's part to engage in provocative arms sales to advance its strategic goals — in this case, the survival of the Assad regime, Russia's sole remaining ally in the region — even in the face of concerted Western opposition. Employing tough language, Secretary of State John F. Kerry warned the Russians against such action. "We've made it crystal clear that we prefer that Russia would not supply them assistance," he declared. "That is on record." Despite such admonitions, Russian officials insist that they have no intention of halting arms deliveries to Assad. "Russia enjoys good and strong military technical cooperation with Syria, and we see no reason today to reconsider it," Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov told reporters.

* In April, during a visit to Jerusalem, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announced a multibillion-dollar arms package for Israel. Although its final details are still being worked out, it is expected to include V-22 "Osprey" tilt-rotor transport planes, KC-135 aerial refueling

aircraft, and advanced radars and anti-radiation missiles for Israel's strike aircraft. "We are committed to providing Israel with whatever support is necessary for Israel to maintain military superiority over any state or coalition of states and non-state actors [in the region]," Hagel told reporters when announcing the package.

The U.S. has, of course, long been committed to Israel's military superiority, so there was something ritualistic about much of Hagel's performance in Jerusalem. No less predictable were the complaints from Israeli military and intelligence sources that the package didn't include enough new arms to satisfy Israel's needs, or were of the wrong kind. The V-22 Osprey, for example, was proclaimed by some to be of marginal military value. Far more surprising was that no red flags went up in the media over what was included. At least two of the items — the KC-135 refueling planes and the anti-radiation missiles (crucial weaponry for disabling an enemy's air-defense radar system) — could only be intended for one purpose: bolstering Israel's capacity to conduct a sustained air campaign against Iranian nuclear facilities, should it decide to do so.

At present, the biggest military obstacles to such an attack are that country's inability to completely cripple Iranian anti-aircraft defense systems and mount sustained long-range air strikes. The missiles and the mid-air refueling capability will go a long way toward eliminating such impediments. Although it may take up to a year for all this new hardware to be delivered and come online, the package can only be read as a green light from Washington for Israel to undertake preparations for an attack on Iran, which has long been shielded from tougher U.N. sanctions by China and Russia.

* In March, Russia agreed to sell 24 Sukhoi Su-35 multi-role combat jets and four Lada-class diesel submarines to China on the eve of newly installed President Xi Jinping's first official visit to Moscow. Although details of the sale have yet to be worked out, observers say that it will represent the most significant transfer of Russian weaponry to China in a decade. The Su-35, a fourth-generation stealth fighter, is superior to any plane now in China's arsenal, while the Lada is a more advanced, quieter version of the Kilo-class sub it already possesses. Together, the two systems will provide the Chinese with a substantial boost in combat quality.

For anyone who has followed Asian security affairs over the past few years, it is hard to view this deal as anything but a reaction to the Obama administration's new Asian strategy, its "pivot" to the Pacific. As announced by President Obama in a speech before the Australian Parliament in November 2011, it involves beefing-up the already strong U.S. air and naval presence in the western Pacific — in, that is, waters off of China — along with increased U.S. arms aid to American allies like Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, and South Korea.

Not surprisingly, China has responded by bolstering its own naval capabilities, announcing plans for the acquisition of a second aircraft carrier (its first began operational testing in late 2012) and the procurement of advanced arms from Russia to fill gaps in its defense structure. This, in turn, is bound to increase the pressure on Washington from Japan, Taiwan, and other allies to provide yet more weaponry, triggering a classic Cold-War-style arms race in the region.

* On the eve of Secretary of State John Kerry's June 24th visit to India, that country's press was full of reports and rumors about upcoming U.S. military sales. Andrew Shapiro, assistant

secretary of state for political-military affairs, was widely quoted as saying that, in addition to sales already in the pipeline, "we think there's going to be billions of dollars more in the next couple of years." In his comments, Shapiro referred to Deputy Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, who, he said, was heading up an arms sales initiative, "which we think is making some good progress and will, hopefully, lead to an even greater pace of additional defense trade with India."

To some degree, of course, this can be viewed as a continuation of weapons sales as a domestic economic motor, since U.S. weapons companies have long sought access to India's vast arms market. But such sales now clearly play another role as well: to lubricate the U.S. drive to incorporate India into the arc of powers encircling China as part of the Obama administration's new Asia-Pacific strategy.

Toward this end, as Deputy Secretary of State William Burns explained back in 2011, "Our two countries launched a strategic dialogue on the Asia-Pacific to ensure that the world's two largest democracies pursue strategies that reinforce one another." Arms transfers are seen by the leaders of both countries as a vital tool in the "containment" of China (though all parties are careful to avoid that old Cold War term). So watch for Kerry to pursue new arms agreements while in New Delhi.

Repeating History

These are just some examples of recent arms deals (or ones under discussion) that suggest a fresh willingness on the part of the major powers to use weapons transfers as instruments of geopolitical intrusion and competition. The reappearance of such behavior suggests a troubling resurgence of Cold War-like rivalries. Even if senior leaders in Washington, Moscow, and Beijing are not talking about resurrecting some twenty-first-century version of the Cold War, anyone with a sense of history can see that they are headed down a grim, well-trodden path toward crisis and confrontation.

What gives this an added touch of irony is that leading arms suppliers and recipients, including the United States, recently voted in the U.N. General Assembly to approve the Arms Trade Treaty that was meant to impose significant constraints on the global trade in conventional weapons. Although the treaty has many loopholes, lacks an enforcement mechanism, and will require years to achieve full implementation, it represents the first genuine attempt by the international community to place real restraints on weapons sales. "This treaty won't solve the problems of Syria overnight, no treaty could do that, but it will help to prevent future Syrias," said Anna MacDonald, the head of arms control for Oxfam International and an ardent treaty supporter. "It will help to reduce armed violence. It will help to reduce conflict."

This may be the hope, but such expectations will quickly be crushed if the major weapons suppliers, led by the U.S. and Russia, once again come to see arms sales as the tool of choice to gain geopolitical advantage in areas of strategic importance. Far from bringing peace and stability — as the proponents of such transactions invariably claim — each new arms deal now holds the possibility of taking us another step closer to a new Cold War with all the heightened

risks of regional friction and conflict that entails. Are we, in fact, seeing a mindless new example of the old saw: that those who don't learn from history are destined to repeat it?