

Combatting Russian Influence through Improved Security Assistance

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When a partner nation undertakes major military modernization efforts through the vehicle of foreign military sales (FMS), especially in aircraft, the process often takes four to five years from the initial request until delivery.¹ As a result, many countries extend or even establish new contractual agreements with Russian manufacturers to maintain Soviet-legacy defense systems in order to preserve their national defense capabilities. The paradoxical effect is that countries transitioning from Russian-produced to US-produced defense systems often fall under even greater Russian influence during this period.

The United States can counter this influence through security assistance mechanisms such as leveraging existing Allied and partner maintenance capabilities, working with existing US partnership efforts, and improving the FMS total package approach.

Confronting Russian Influence

The United States' 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* identifies Russia as a competitor "determined to enhance its global influence and play a disruptive role on the world stage."² This recognition comes after Russia has violated borders in attempts to dominate the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighboring states.³ As the world's second-largest arms exporter, Russia exerts significant influence by controlling the maintenance certification of Soviet-legacy defense systems that many countries still use nearly 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴

In response, the United States has leveraged its security assistance with programs such as the European Recapitalization Initiative Program, designed to bolster Allies and partners facing Russia's revisionist aggression.⁵ Programs such as this use foreign military finance grants to enhance capabilities and NATO interoperability through FMS.⁶ Also, restrictive efforts such as the 2017 Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) seek to reduce Russian influence by sanctioning governments and persons who facilitate significant transactions for or on behalf of Russia.⁷

Maintaining Legacy Systems

After their decisions to purchase US-produced military aircraft, Slovakia and Bulgaria had to continue agreements with Russian manufacturers to maintain their Soviet-legacy systems until the US systems were delivered.⁸ Slovakia faced this crisis with both rotary- and fixed-wing aircraft. After agreeing to purchase nine UH-60M Blackhawk helicopters in 2015, Slovakia waited five years for full aircraft delivery and chose to maintain its existing Mi-17 helicopters in the interim, which led to further agreements with Russia.⁹ While Slovakia could maintain its Mi-17 helicopters, Russia controlled the maintenance certification of those aircraft. Slovakia faced a similar situation in 2018 when it agreed to purchase F-16 Block 70 aircraft through FMS: in the period between purchase and acquisition, it had to continue to maintain its MiG-29 aircraft inventory.¹⁰

This scenario repeated itself in 2019 when Bulgaria agreed to purchase F-16 aircraft through FMS but also sought to maintain its MiG-29 aircraft,¹¹ which risked violating CAATSA. Today Croatia is facing a similar dilemma as it seeks to purchase US-produced aircraft but requires interim maintenance for its MiG-21 aircraft.¹²

Letting Legacy Systems Fail

As the United States promotes NATO-interoperable solutions through either FMS, third-party transfers, or direct commercial sales, it should consider solutions to support the transition from Soviet-legacy equipment.¹³ While the FMS total package approach includes training and maintenance support, it does not specifically support the transition away from a legacy system. This omission can leave countries with the choice of letting maintenance certificates expire, ignoring CAATSA to extend agreements with Russia, or seeking alternative maintenance certification during their modernization transition period.

Allowing maintenance certificates to expire generally results in a loss of military airworthiness certification from the European Defence Agency. Nations that lose this certification may experience a degradation in air-policing capabilities with an inability to conduct cross-border operations.¹⁴ Albania, Montenegro, and Slovenia have allowed maintenance certificates to expire but now receive air policing from the Italian, Greek, and Hungarian Air Forces.¹⁵ Similarly, NATO Allies provide air-policing support to the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. While these efforts secure Alliance airspace and promote cooperation among NATO members, the United States should work to create more capabilities among partners and Allies, not greater requirements.

Slovakia and Bulgaria have chosen to ignore CAATSA and cooperate with Russia to maintain legacy systems. Beyond the problem of Russian influence, this cooperation often places Russian technicians near newly arriving NATO aircraft, endangering the proprietary and classified nature of the technology. Violations of CAATSA lessen the benefit of adopting NATO-interoperable aircraft, placing smaller countries into difficult negotiations with Russia and potentially damaging their relationships with the United States.

Leveraging Existing In-Country Capabilities

Ironically, many of these countries can already perform work on legacy fixed- and rotary-wing Russian aircraft at their maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO) facilities. Such facilities exist in Bulgaria, Czechia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia.¹⁶ Unfortunately, maintenance certification still resides with Russian manufacturers who can withhold certification for customers transitioning away from Russian defense systems.

In the case referred to above, Bulgaria initially intended to use Poland's MRO facility at Bydgoszcz, which maintains MiG-29 aircraft without Russian certification. But legal threats from Russia led Bulgaria to determine the Russian manufacturer was the only reliable option.¹⁷ As a result, Bulgaria signed a \$51 million contract with the manufacturer to modernize its MiG-29 aircraft.¹⁸ Since then, Bulgaria has signed additional maintenance contracts with the manufacturer to sustain its NATO air-policing mission, despite operating its facility in Plovdiv, capable of maintaining MiG-29 aircraft.¹⁹

In Slovakia, the *Letecké Opravovne Trenčín* aircraft maintenance facility continues to maintain and overhaul Russian Mi-17 helicopters despite their Russian maintenance certification expiring, most notably under contract to the NATO Security and Procurement Agency for Afghan Air Force Mi-17 helicopters.²⁰ While some European countries will not accept Russian aircraft maintenance certification from any facility not certified by Russia, Poland's willingness to certify maintenance on their MiG aircraft and at least offer that service to Bulgaria, as well as Slovakia's work for NATO on Afghan Air Force Mi-17 helicopters, help weaken Russian influence.

Leveraging Existing DOD Partnerships

Another option to confront a country's dependence upon Russia for aircraft maintenance is providing access to US-produced aircraft by loaning aircraft or providing flying hours with a partnered USAF fixed-wing or US Army rotary-wing unit.

The US National Guard State Partnership Program, which partners 21 Air and Army National Guards with 22 countries in the United States European Command area of responsibility, already supports combined aviation operations and exercises between countries and partnered states and could be an official element of FMS.²¹ Additionally, active and reserve Army and Air Force units conducting force rotations in Europe, such as the USAF 457th Expeditionary Fighter Squadron, which is in Romania and is flying with the Romanian Air Force, could support countries awaiting delivery of US aircraft through FMS.²²

Rethinking the Total Package Approach

The FMS goal to provide capabilities to a partner or an Ally through a total package approach has made FMS a popular choice for many countries. In order to increase that competitive advantage, the Department of Defense should consider a plan to guide a country, not just from initial request to full fielding but through its transition away from Soviet-legacy systems with a combination of the aforementioned methods. Such a plan could significantly enhance the military capabilities of Allies and partners and help achieve the objectives of FMS to “strengthen the security of the U.S. and promote world peace.”²³

Assisting Ally and partner militaries’ transition toward NATO interoperability will require multiple solutions. Despite the legal and logistical challenges, MRO support could be effective in reducing a country’s dependence on Russia for Soviet-legacy aircraft maintenance. Although limited spare parts and potential legal challenges by countries not accepting alternative maintenance certificates make this approach problematic, it could be part of a range of solutions for an Ally or partner military to maintain rotary- or fixed-wing aviation capabilities.

When MRO support is not an option, Ally and partner access to US aircraft through the National Guard’s State Partnership Program or through cooperation with rotating US Army or USAF units could enable earlier adoption of NATO interoperable solutions and limit Russian influence. Furthermore, cooperation, either with rotating USAF units or through the State Partnership Program, enhances the abilities of US, Ally, and partner pilots, builds relationships that promote better interoperability, and could assist US efforts toward access, basing, and overflight.

Conclusion

Foreign military sales, which provide access to the latest US technology with training and maintenance support, continue to attract Ally and partner countries. But if the United States wants to be competitive, it should support necessary supplier transition periods as well. Despite the challenges, facilitating these tran-

sition efforts could better enable Ally and partner militaries to achieve greater interoperability, reduce Russian influence, and ultimately build closer working relationships with the United States. Supporting transition efforts could be the difference for many countries between enhancing NATO capabilities or remaining within Russia's logistical sphere of influence. Our European Allies and partners are standing at a crossroads and are looking to the United States for leadership. We should not waste this opportunity. 🌟

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Notes

1. Estimate based on the author's experience as a chief of defense cooperation in a former Warsaw Pact state and overseeing US European Command's security cooperation efforts in the states of former Yugoslavia.
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