

Bout, Sechin and a Political Firestorm

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Once again, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has expressed support for a Russian citizen wanted by the United States. This time, the person in question is Viktor Bout, the suspected arms dealer whom a Thai court ruled last Friday should be extradited to the United States to face trial. “I assure you that we will continue to do everything necessary to push for his return to his homeland,” Lavrov said, adding that the court decision was “unlawful and political.”

Bout was arrested on charges of offering to sell 100 Russian MANPAD anti-aircraft weapons to FBI agents posing as members of the Colombian militant group FARC. To get some perspective on what 100 MANPADS can do, I will cite another figure: The CIA gave the mujahedin about 500 Stinger surface-to-air missiles during the Afghan War, and after the war ended in the late 1980s, it launched a program to buy back the remaining Stingers at \$183,000 each. It purchased about 300 missiles this way. That means the 200 anti-aircraft missiles that were used during the war were sufficient to knock out Soviet air domination.

In other words, the delivery of 100 Russian anti-aircraft missiles appears to be a government-sponsored program. It is difficult to imagine that such deliveries could be made without a

blessing from above. The ideology is clear: Russians supply FARC in the same way the Americans supplied the mujahedin. That is Russia's asymmetrical response to those damn Yanks.

According to U.S. think tank Stratfor, a man named Igor Sechin served in Mozambique in the 1980s along with Bout. Today, many consider Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin to be the second-most powerful person in Russia after Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

In another twist, an Il-76 jet was impounded in Bangkok with 35 tons of weapons on board on Dec. 12, 2009. The airplane had flown from North Korea and was previously owned by a firm controlled by Bout. Immediately after the seizure, state-owned RIA-Novosti news agencies cited a report in the Bangkok Post as saying the airplane was registered in Georgia. However, the article in the Bangkok newspaper said, "The aircraft, an Ilyushin-76 transport registered in Kazakhstan ..."

That would have been unremarkable, except the fact that the aircraft was indeed re-registered from a Kazakh company to Air West Georgia, a company registered in Kutaisi, Georgia, was not confirmed publicly until the next day.

The question arises: How did RIA-Novosti know the plane was registered to a Georgian company if it flew from North Korea, was impounded in Thailand, and even the Thai authorities thought that it was registered in Kazakhstan?

The answer is easy if you know anything about Air West Georgia. The company's legal address is at Kopitnari Airport in Georgia, but its actual location is at Vnukovo Airport in Moscow, according to AviaPages.ru, an industry web site. A third address for Air West Georgia is also listed in the business directory Gde24.ru, this one near the Okhotny Ryad metro station and just a stone's throw from the Kremlin and the headquarters of the Federal Security Service on Lubyanskaya Ploshchad.

Despite the international scandal, nobody has searched the airline's offices at Vnukovo or near Lubyanskaya Ploshchad, and those addresses are still posted on the Internet. What's more, Lavrov has spoken out in defense of Bout.

In one respect, I must agree with Lavrov: The Bout case is undoubtedly political. In fact, it is frightening to consider what Bout could tell U.S. authorities about who promised to provide him with 100 Russian anti-aircraft weapons.

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