

Russia Starts Delivering \$1Bln Arms Package to Azerbaijan

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A T-90 tank during the Victory Day parade in 2009.

Russia has begun delivering tanks, artillery cannons and rocket launchers worth \$1 billion to Azerbaijan, a Moscow-based defense group said Tuesday, as Baku strengthens its military readiness in the volatile South Caucasus.

Oil- and gas-producing Azerbaijan, where President Ilham Aliyev faces re-election in October, has boosted arms spending and threatened to take back the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh by force from neighboring Armenia.

Nestled between Iran, arch-rival Armenia and its former Soviet master Russia, Azerbaijan sits on a web of oil and gas pipelines that carry its offshore energy reserves to Europe via Turkey, its ally.

The arms package, signed in a series of contracts between 2011 and 2012, includes nearly 100

T-90C tanks, Smerch and TOS-1A multiple rocket launchers and Msta-A and Vena artillery cannons, said Ruslan Pukhov, director of defense think tank CAST.

A source at the Russian Defense Ministry said the order had been on hold for some time to avoid upsetting the military balance in the South Caucasus, where Russia has a military base in Armenia and an agreement to defend the country if it comes under attack. But the deal had been pushed through at the behest of Russia's powerful arms industry, he said.

A spokesman at Russia's state arms exporter Rosoboronexport was unavailable for comment.

Russia has almost completed deliveries of a previous, larger package, estimated by CAST as worth \$2 billion to \$3 billion and including S-300 missile systems and attack helicopters. Azerbaijan has also announced a \$1.6 billion arms deal with Israel.

Although political and defense analysts doubt Azerbaijan has any immediate appetite for war, it has increased its military spending in recent years. Aliyev has said spending on defense will reach \$3.7 billion this year.

Armenian President Serzh Sarkysyan said last year that Azerbaijan was accumulating a "horrendous quantity" of arms and was threatening Armenia with a new war.

Azerbaijan and ethnic Armenians fought a war in the early 1990s in the mountainous Nagorno-Karabakh enclave which is inside Azerbaijan.

About 30,000 people were killed in the war, which ended in a truce in 1994, although no peace treaty has ever been agreed.

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