THE UNITED STATES purchased 21 MiG 29 fighter aircraft from Moldova during October, preempting Iran's efforts to acquire potential delivery systems for weapons of mass destruction. The capability of 14 of the Russian made aircraft to deliver nuclear weapons, although disputed by Russian Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev, allowed the acquisition to be carried out under the Defense Department's Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) Program. Under an agreement finalized on October 10, the United States acquired 14 MiG 29Cs, described by U.S. officials as wired to permit delivery of nuclear weapons, six MiG 29As, one MiG 29B, 500 air to air missiles and all the spare parts and diagnostic equipment present at the Moldovan air base where the aircraft were stationed. In return, Moldova will receive a cash payment, humanitarian assistance and non lethal excess defense articles such as trucks. Although the value of the package was not disclosed, Reuters reported on November 5 that Moldovan Finance Minister Valeriu Chitan said the cash payment equaled about $40 million. New aircraft of comparable capabilities cost approximately $20 million to $25 million apiece.

The MiG 29Cs would have qualitatively improved Iran's air force by providing it with a more advanced fighter than its older model MiG 29s, a goal Tehran has sought since the Gulf War. With about 30 Russian made Su 24s, a sophisticated low altitude bomber, and both Scud and Scud variant missiles, Iran already possesses other systems more suited to deliver nuclear weapons than the MiG 29Cs.

Moldova informed the United States in late 1996 of Iranian inquiries regarding the availability of the fighters and subsequently of an Iranian inspection of the aircraft. The Clinton administration, which considers Tehran to be vigorously pursuing the acquisition and development of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems, initiated negotiations with Moldova in February 1997 to prevent the sale.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright certified Moldova (along with the former Soviet republics of Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) on March 4, 1997, as eligible for the CTR program, which provides assistance to states of the former Soviet Union in implementing denuclearization initiatives, securing fissile materials and preventing proliferation. The United States and Moldova concluded on June 23 a CTR "umbrella" agreement authorizing future cooperative activities.

According to a report in Ria Novosti, a Russian newspaper, Sergeyev claimed that the Soviet military had removed the "hardware" permitting delivery of nuclear weapons in 1989. The difference between the U.S. and Russian definitions of "nuclear capable" is apparently largely semantic, reflecting whether the appropriate arming hardware has to accompany the necessary connecting wiring for the equipment.

In late October, U.S. crews partially dismantled the fighters and transported them aboard C 17 cargo jets to Wright Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio, where the fighters will be reassembled, analyzed and used for training purposes. The MiG 29Cs are the first ever obtained by the United States and U.S. officials expect these models will provide additional insights into the capabilities of the MiG 29 class, which remains an important element in the active air forces of many former Eastern bloc nations and their client states.

Moldova retained six MiG 29C fighters, but intends to sell them to a state not considered "rogue" by the United States, thereby eliminating its entire air force in an effort to cut costs. According to the
International Institute for Strategic Studies' The Military Balance 1997/98, the states of the former Soviet Union (not including Russia) currently have 284 MiG 29s in their active forces, but a Defense Department (DOD) official estimated that the newer model MiG 29Cs number in the "tens." DOD officials said the United States is not starting a MiG buying spree, but will continue to take steps to prevent rogue states from buying advanced weapons.

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